



Scholastic Art & Writing Awards



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WRITING

Silver Key Winners

Student Name: Maria Hernandez
Grade: 9
School: Kerr High School
Title: Raise Awareness for Eugenia
Category: Critical Essay
Key: Silver Key
Educator: Safraz Ali

There is a well-known YouTuber by the name of Eugenia Cooney who has become the subject of concern due to her skinny appearance. Many of her viewers have expressed worry for her well-being and urged her to seek treatment. Despite this, the majority of comments seem to be supportive and genuinely concerned, rather than negative or hateful towards her. I have been checking up on her for quite some time since I first saw one of her videos. I check on her to make sure she's still alive or to see if she is getting treatment. But for her to keep doing these videos because of social media. I blame this on social media because the more views they give her the more she's going to post and she knows that her being that skinny makes people watch her videos. People these days are doing anything for the view. For example, Nikado Avocado used to be healthy and normal weight but now he's an obese person that could die from a heart attack any moment with the way he is eating. But he keeps doing it because of the tremendous view and fame he gets from doing this. Social media should stop and ban these types of videos as there are a lot of young people watching this and they may think this is okay. People should stop watching these YouTubers so they can stop doing these videos and get some medical help. Eugenia has a lot of kids watching her and they may also have an eating disorder. Watching her videos does not help as they encourage them to think it's okay and if she is that skinny maybe they are fat and that type of thinking. Cooney's behavior and attitude further contribute to the concern surrounding her. Despite evidence suggesting otherwise, she often dismisses claims about her health and repeatedly insists that she eats enough. While it is important to respect everyone's autonomy and personal choices, her situation raises important questions about the responsibility of influencers and the potential harm they may cause. While the internet grants individuals the freedom to express themselves, there should be guidelines in place to protect individuals, especially those who may be vulnerable or easily influenced. Platforms and social media companies should take a more active role in monitoring content that may harm individuals' mental and physical well-being. It is crucial to acknowledge that the social media landscape is highly competitive. With thousands of individuals vying for attention and relevance, creators often resort to extreme tactics to ensure their content stands out. They don't care if they are ruining their health or have the potential of getting beaten up; they just want views. In conclusion, I want people to stop liking and giving fame to Eugenia's videos and I hope she can get some help and live her life as a normal human being. Honestly, I just

want her to get better and stop posting her videos on social media. Her mother encourages her to do the videos and doesn't seem like she wants her daughter to get better at all. So if her mother isn't going to do anything for her, we as her fans, or concern for her should help her know that what she's doing is wrong and that she could die young from malnutrition.

Student Name: Perla Rodriguez

Grade: 8

School: O'Donnell Middle School

Title: A Pearl

Category: Poetry

Key: Silver Key

Educator: Kaneisha Hicks

A veil of darkness
the shimmering pearl of the night
beauty is such a dark world

a celestial being
a person
a goddess
something out of this world

submerged in the black hole,
shining brighter,
brighter among the freckles of the dark,
bigger than the specks of stars

she's different,
different from the rest

the ethereal glow,
outshine everything in the vault of heaven
the silver rays of warmth,
cover the sky in a thin blanket

she's cold,
beautiful,
but
cold

many pieces missing,
taken,
stolen,
broken apart.
yet

she can be so full
so full of hope
so full of light
so full of life.

phases of emptiness,
phases of fullness,
her deep hunger
her yearning to escape from the desolation,
the dark

she's just like an angel
one who loves,
one who engulfs me in her warm wings
and her aura of light

if only I could return these feelings
and maybe
just
maybe
I could help her escape from the alienation

my heart has stopped beating,
I no longer feel it in my chest,
she has bewitched me with her spells
those sonnets,
those whispers,
she has stolen my heart

oh...
who is she?
an eye?
the witness of life?

show me what lies between those changing faces
show me your world.

I watch you from afar
and you may not know who I am
I may be a grain of sand,
or a speck of dust,
or possibly nothing to you

but I will forever reach for you
even during the darkest of nights,
even if it means
I too,
will be consumed by the darkness
I will chase after you
like the sun

Student Name: Faith Omoruyi
Grade: 9
School: Alief Early College High School
Title: A Shot For Each Life
Category: Poetry
Key: Silver Key
Educator: Arkisha Cooper

1 SHOT!
BOOM!

2 SHOTS!
BOOM!

3 SHOTS!
BOOM!

4 SHOTS!
BOOM!

BOOM! BOOM! BOOM!
and last BANG!
7 SHOTS!

Echoes of sirens pierce the night, red and blue lights come flashing
Unjust Protocols are followed
Step 1: Stop the car
Step 2: Gently put your License on the dashboard
Step 3: If your skin is painted in color also put your hands on the dashboard
(you don't want to be considered a threat, now do you?)
Step 4: If you want to live, follow steps 1-4; comply with every single instruction.

Gunshots echo through my head
Nightmares filled with terror
My mind starts to shed
"Step out of the car!" the officer says surprised that we've already followed protocols
"Put your hands up!" he continues

We beg for mercy, intrusive thoughts start to spread
Veins slowly shed
"What have we done? What's your reason for pulling us over?"

"Turn around!" The officer goes on
My cousin James slowly answers, "It's because we're black huh?"

Unfortunately, "It's because we're black" were the exact same words
Daunte Wright said before he was shot...dead.

So 1 SHOT! BOOM! For Daunte Wright, 21!
Your color is a threat! The officer declares
Do not resist! He goes on

As James starts to budge, cameras start rolling
His face becomes Smudged and slammed on the ground (Cries of justice emerge)
STOP moving! The officer pronounces
One foot goes up and back down on my cousin's neck

I CAN'T BREATHE! I CAN'T BREATHE!
My cousin cries on
My hand starts shaking
My body is slowly breaking
I'm scared because "I can't breathe"
were the exact same words Jorge Floyd said before he died. Pulseless.
So BOOM! 2 SHOTS! Another life taken
George Floyd, at 46!

As my cousin reaches for his phone to tell his mother he loves her
"What are you doing?" the officer screams. Put your hands back up!

BOOM!
3 SHOTS!
Gone. James Carter, 18!
Blood starts gushing
People start fussing
Tears start rushing

Should I feel MAD, ANGRY, UPSET, RESENTFUL, OUTRAGED, FURIOUS
I don't even know
My head is spinning I'm losing control
LORD help me, help me to get through this day
My eyes are in Dismay
My cousin is gone with no words left to say

What have you done? People start yelling

The officer quickly replies "I thought he was going to pull out a gun"

Those were the exact same words an officer said when

Breoanna Taylor, 26!

In her car.....4 SHOTS!...DEAD..

Why do you have to look at my skin before you get to know me?

I'm tired of the police brutality spree

The way humans are being treated

because of their race is slowly becoming a tragedy

We are legally free but is that so in society

Why is living to see another day questioned?

Not to mention the tension that is happening.

Why is comprehending one's life

Related to the outcome of one's future?

Why are there so many questions but no one to answer?

So, I want you to know these names and a shot for each of their lives

Atatiana Jefferson, 28!

5 SHOTS! BOOM!

Stephon Clark, 22!

6 SHOTS! BOOM!

Fanisha Fonville, 20!

7 SHOTS! BOOM!

Whether you are American Indian,

Alaska Native, Asian,

Black or African-American,

Native Hawaiian, White, or other Pacific Islander

Female or Male

We all must come together

So let me change the script: "Black Lives Matter" Yes

But honestly, all lives matter.

1 SHOT!

BOOM!

2 SHOTS!
BOOM!

3 SHOTS!
BOOM!

4 SHOTS!
BOOM!

BOOM! BOOM! BOOM!

and last BANG! Dropped dead
7 SHOTS!

Student Name: Mai Nguyen

Grade: 11

School: Kerr High School

Title: A Spiral Notebook

Category: Short Story

Key: Silver Key

Educator: Ayn Nys

Dear diary, today is July 8, 1988,

Today was the day my little sister got home! Last night I heard my mom and dad run out the door while mom yelled, "The baby's coming! The baby's coming!" They were holding a big bag and later my mamaw came. She told me that the baby started to come out of mom's belly and that they had to go to a hospital to deliver the baby. I waited for mom and dad to come back, but grandma said it was night and I had to go to sleep. When I woke up, grandma made me bacon and eggs. When I had eggs in my mouth, mom and dad came in the door. I ran to the door to see them, and dad told me I have a baby sister and her name is Isabelle! She looked really little in her baby carrier but she just came out of mom's belly so I guess there wasn't a lot of room in there to grow. I sat on the couch and mom and dad let me hold her while grandma took pictures. She wouldn't open her eyes like everyone else and moved only a little. I don't like her very much. I don't think my mom does either. She didn't look at Isabelle and only stared out the window behind us. She didn't smile like everyone else.

Dear diary, today is July 23, 1988

There was a lot of lightning today. Isabelle's room is next to mine and when I woke up, everyone else was still sleeping, so I went to see her. I get scared when it thunders, so I thought Isabelle would be scared too but I think she's braver than me because she wasn't crying like she always does. Her crib is tall so I have to get on my tippy toes to see her. She was staring at the baby mobile I helped mom and dad choose. It has blue clouds because I wanted her to be a boy, but I'm okay with her being a girl now. I know girls can play Legos with me too. She started making the sounds she always makes when she's hungry so I had to go to mom and dad's room. When I opened the door they were laying in bed and awake. Dad was reading a book and looked mad and mom had her eyes closed but she looked mad too. Their eyes had dark circles and mom had a lot of tissues around her. Her nose was red too so I think she's sick. I didn't want Isabelle to get sick so I told dad that she got hungry. He looked really tired and I felt bad for making him wake up. When he got up to make the bottle of milk, I made sure to watch him and learn how to do it by myself.

Dear diary, today is August 15, 1988,

I had my first first day of first grade today. I woke up really tired, but I knew I had to go to school to finish learning so I could come home and play with Isabelle. Mom said she was tired today so dad made me a bowl of cereal and drove me to school. I told all my friends about my new little sister and we played family during recess. School was okay today. It wasn't bad but I really don't like math. At the end of the day, dad picked me up. I knew because I saw a red car instead of mom's black car in the car rider line. When I got in I saw Isabelle in the middle seat I always sat in so I sat next to her. Dad told me it was the safest spot for the baby. Mom is always sitting next to the driver, but I didn't see her until I got home. When we got home I held Isabelle's big bag for dad as he took her carrier out. When dad opened the door I went to put Isabelle's bag on the counter. Dad put Isabelle on her mat in the living room for tummy time. Mom was cooking dinner for us and it smelled really good. I played with Isabelle until mom finished with dinner. I helped set the table with plates and forks and dad put Isabelle in the high chair. Mom made us steak and broccoli. Dinner didn't look good after she put the broccoli on my plate. I wanted to eat but mom told me to put my fork down and to put my hands together. She started talking about a heavenly father and thanking him. I don't know why she's talking to nobody. She looked really scared. Dad followed her and put his hands together too. I think we're thanking Mother Nature's husband for the food he gave us.

Dear diary, today is October 30, 1988,

Mom woke everyone up really early today. The sun was only just coming up to the sky. I put on jeans but mom didn't like what I wanted to wear so she changed my clothes. She made me wear a suit and a tie. The shirt she put on me felt hard and the pants were tight so it was hard to walk. Dad wore a suit too and mom and Isabelle wore really pretty dresses. When we got in the car I asked mom where we were going and she said church because we were going to pray. I don't really get it. When we got to the church it had a really tall white tower that I thought was really pretty. There were a lot of people in the parking lot and they were dressed nice like us. When we got inside there were really long chairs for everyone to sit on. Mom made us sit in the front together. At the front, there was a stage with a tall table. For a really long time nothing happened and everyone walked around, looking for a place to sit. But soon someone in a really long dress came up to the table. I didn't really get what he said, but he did thank heavenly father too, just like mom. She told me he was our priest and that he'd help us to salvayshun. It took a really really long time for him to finish talking. When everyone got up, mom took Isabelle up to him and she told him something that made him give her a little bottle and a plus sign.

Dear diary, today is November 8, 1988,

Mom put a lot of new stuff in Isabelle's room. She hung the plus up in Isabelle's room, and added a lot more. She put the bottle that the preest gave her in Isabelle's room too. I think she's scared of a bad guy because she keeps talking about how she doesn't want a demun to take Isabelle. She's not being like normal her.

Dear diary, today is December 23, 1988,

Mom is being strange. I woke up really early to help mom go to the store because dad had to work today. We're having a Christmas party! I even made myself breakfast because I'm big now, and because mom seems tired. I got a bowl from the cabinet and milk from the fridge. I had to use a chair to get there but the cereal was lower so I didn't need to use a chair for that. I got a new and clean spoon from the dishwasher too. When I put away my bowl and spoon and changed my clothes, I made sure to put on the plus sign mom told me to always wear. When I finished, I still didn't see her. I went to her room, but she wasn't there. When I went to Isabelle's room, she was sleeping on the rocking chair next to the crib where Isabelle was sleeping too. I think she fell asleep while reading to her last night because a book with a cross on it was in her lap. I tapped her and she woke up with a shock. She realized what time it was and left to go get ready. I helped her by putting some diapers and clothes into Isabelle's big bag too. For if Isabelle needs to get changed. When I finished putting everything in the bag, mom finished too, and started to change Isabelle and put her in the carrier. Mom carried Isabelle to the car while I took the bag to the car to help. After Isabelle got buckled in, I buckled myself in too. I felt sleepy so I went to sleep with my head on Isabelle's car seat. When I woke up, we were at the groshery store, but mom wasn't in the car. It was really cold I got really scared! I opened the door first and then tried to unbuckle Isabelle from her carrier. A very nice lady saw me and helped me take Isabelle out of the car. She asked me where my mom was and I told her she went in the store. She took me and Isabelle into the store with her where I sat with people that worked at the store. They said something over the speaker in the store and a police officer asked me a lot of questions. I got scared because I was afraid he was going to take me to jail. I sat there with Isabelle for a long time because everyone was waiting for something. Later, my dad came and I knew he was who everyone was waiting for. He ran and looked really scared. The police officer and the store workers talked to him for a longer time so I had to wait even more. I wanted to look for mom but they told me to sit. Because I couldn't go look for her, I was always asking where mom was but no one listened to me. When they were done talking dad finally took us home, but mom didn't come with us.

Dear diary, today is March 19, 1989,

I haven't seen mom in a long time. Me and Isabelle have been staying at grandma's house because dad said he had to take care of mom for a little bit, but this little bit is becoming a very big bit. Dad comes to visit but mom never does. Sometimes when grandma and dad don't know I'm listening, they'll talk about mom being in a hospital. I didn't think she was sick when I saw her. Was it because of that one time I got a cold from school? I got better really soon, I didn't think I made mom sick too. I miss my mommy, and I think Isabelle does too.

Dear diary, today is April 27, 1989

Dad told me we're gonna visit mom in the hospital tomorrow. He said Isabel won't come with us because she's so little, so she's gonna be with grandma. We're gonna bring flowers for mom! He asked me to make a card for her too. I hope seeing the flowers and my card help her get better quicker.

Dear diary, today is April 28, 1989,

We visited mom today. The hospital was really big. Dad held the flowers for mom when we were in the waiting room and I was still coloring mom's card. When I finished coloring in my last flower, a nurse came to take us to mom's room. Dad held my hand all the way to her door and let go to knock. Mom was sitting up in her bed, next to the window. The sun made her shine. She was paler, and her dark circles grew bigger since I last saw her a long time ago. Dad put the flowers on the table next to mom's bed, and I tried giving her the card I made but she wouldn't look at me. She even looked a little scared of me. Dad pulled a chair for me to sit in while he sat on the bed and talked to mom. When I tried to talk to mom, she wouldn't talk back to me. Does she hate me? I didn't do anything to make her mad at me. They talked about things I didn't know. I wanted to tell mom about how Isabelle started to crawl, and how I got into the all A honor roll, but she wouldn't look at me. I waited a long time for them to finish talking so we could go home. Mom didn't say bye to me. I don't like how she is now. I miss my old mom.

Student Name: Rebecca Oyeniya

Grade: 11

School: Kerr High School

Title: And the Gap

Category: Flash Fiction

Key: Silver Key

Educator: Ayn Nys

And the Gap

“Waah waah”; the joyful sounds of her crying marked the start of my life. Amidst the cries my journey began, as I emerged from the darkness in the mouth of a newborn. Before I met the tooth challengers, it was just us three. All of me, her tender gums and the young tongue. With every reach of her mother’s hand, a lifted giggle or a cry erupted. Vibrations ridiculed through the throat, inciting her mouth to become unlocked for hours. And then, at last, my salvation arrived, bringing forth the warm embrace of light and the crisp smell of fresh air. It was like riding the high of a rollercoaster time and time again.

I didn’t realize what was happening, but apparently, her growth creates changes. Mouth's saliva started flowing, and more jelly-like toys appeared for her gums to gnaw upon. That was when I first saw them. We were no longer alone. The parasites had arrived. My breaths quickened in time and became deeply gone. First, there were the two teeth below, small at first, and hardly noticeable. Then their friends started appearing one by one, two by two, and in folds. All taking pieces of me as they appeared. Soon, I realized what I had to do to preserve myself. I anticipated the arrival of her top teeth and planned my attack. They would not take that top space from me, I needed access to the light. When they arrived, I made sure to place myself in between them and separate them. I measured exactly a half inch, which was the bare minimum. Soon her mouth was completely enwrapped with those pearly white fiends. And there I was, occupying my significantly smaller space.

I tried my hardest to stick to my routine even with certain conditions. Every time vibrations emitted from her throat, I got excitedly ready for my usual rollercoaster.

One...two...three,

Light- no

Darkness.

Darkness.

Darkness.

Every single time!

The same sweaty five-fingered flesh was there in a second to cover it. Every single time! The second I would get light, it was all over in a flash. It happened like a recurring nightmare, except it was real. Way back in my prime, hearing the phrase "say cheese" was my favorite thing. When her mouth opened, I positioned myself in my favorite pose for everyone to see. Now, when I hear that phrase, her mouth stays closed and awkwardly turns upwards. Who does she think she is? Like this wasn't enough, I was tormented by the constant peppy voices of ways to get rid of "the gap".

"SIX AMAZING WAYS TO GET RID OF THAT TOOTH GAP"

"DIY: CLOSE GAP TEETH AT HOME"

"EASY: HOW I CLOSED THE GAPS IN MY TEETH"

I could feel heated hate for me radiating through her body. Living like that for years was horror, but I clung to the hope that I might get some top-air visuals.

Years passed, and she turned 23. Mint, rubbing oil, and acrylic. I smelled the aroma and knew what time it was. Now I'll be honest with you, I was beyond excited, this only happened twice a year. Her mouth would be stretched open for what felt like a million light years. And I would get to watch as the fiends got scrubbed clean of their filth with all sorts of creepy metal instruments.

I couldn't shake off this eerie feeling that I was being targeted.

I brushed it off.

After all, there was nothing to fear, I'd been here a million times; The procedure never changed.

So there I was, soaking in that extremely bright fluorescent light and the smell of the beautiful air.

The point metal instrument was brought out and it started descending to her mouth. I relaxed and got ready.

Wait-

I did a double-take.

Was it coming my way?

IT WAS.

It split me right in half! Then after disappearing, it came again with a gooey substance, that occupied the same color as those fiends. That was my longest day which ended in my space becoming even smaller, and my half-inch was gone. I could feel my voice being hushed, as I felt my breath diminishing. I could barely see the world out from my toothy challengers, and when her mouth closed, the darkness felt even darker.

Darkness.

Darkness.

Darkness.

It became my only friend. And as small as I was, I still managed to secure a sliver of sight. A sliver of my life.

Soon, the five-fingered flesh no longer appeared. She giggled and her mouth shined a whole lot more. My exposure to light and air became more frequent, but it was of no use to me. I barely existed.

No,

I wasn't even existing.

I could feel the time passing as she aged. Loud engines roared, a swift shift happened, and I became unknown to this new place. The weather had changed, and I could feel the sun's heat rays tanning. The air here was arid and hot. Music radiated through her body as the beat of a drum grew louder and fiercer. The laughter of the newly found family was abundant here.

"Everyone say cheese!"

My world was flipped upside down when those words were spoken. I was rocked to my core when I saw myself as she formed her "perfect" smile.

Is that me?

I saw my old self and it looked incredibly better than I did. I was long, wide, and bold. Everything I wanted to be. This place was a different experience from what I'm used to. And I sense the immense regret flowing. She was looking into reflections of her old self. My human didn't hate me anymore! The process of my end was finally wrapping up.

However, I couldn't help but feel overwhelmed with happiness as my light diminished finally...Even if I couldn't live my best life, I'm glad my other versions could.

Student Name: Sofia Sanchez
Grade: 8
School: Albright Middle School
Title: Back When We Were Kids
Category: Personal Essay & Memoir
Key: Silver Key
Educator: Megan Kelly

“ As juveniles we felt as though life went by unrushed and steady. Presently we say life is moving at such a fast pace. This concern and urgency is simple. Back when we were children we hadn’t much experience in the world. We had few memories and moments to cherish. Or in other words, we couldn't recall quite as many occurrences at such an early age. But as we’ve grown we can look back on countless moments in our past and feel our life soaring by. ” - Santiago S

My brother is currently studying Psychology at the University of Houston; so he is surrounded by such discoveries all the time. He came home one day and enthusiastically shared this with my family. I found myself pondering on this much later and realized how this stuck out to me. I now understand why I find myself urgently snapping a photo on any occasion. Spending quality time with loved ones, watching sunsets and pretty sceneries, a wealthy looking car or even myself in a funny looking hat, I feel the need to capture this moment with a quick photograph.

Thus, this passion for photography comes with various controversies. “You should enjoy the present and not waste time on meaningless photos you’ll delete later.” Every so often I hear this specific sentence lingering in the mouths of family, friends, and even irrelevant strangers. But the only response I’ve given them is “It’s for the memories.” I feel as though growing up is

keeping us from truly taking in the potential all around us. Thoughts and occupations we find ourselves keeping up with consume all of our limited time.

Zoning out and thinking about how I'll never be living this exact second, minute, month or year is an often occurrence for me. I can't wrap my finger around the fact that we're not proceeding in life in any type of way, we're slowly getting closer to our finish line day by day. On days like this I like to pop in my airpods and listen to "When We Were Young By : Adele" 5 simple lines cycle in the interior of my brain. "Let me photograph you in this light, in case it is the last time, that we might be exactly like we were before we realized; we were scared of getting old." These pure words help me confirm that time travel is in fact a reality, with just a quick and easy photograph. We can enter a completely different dimension and suddenly relive a past occurrence in our lives.

I can confidently say, it's easy for me to forget the simplest but most meaningful experiences that have taken place at some point in my life. I can get caught up in stressful times and make this my only focus. But, with photography I feel as though a cherished memory is never forgotten. "Memories" don't always have to be engraved in our mind; they can be represented as a visual as well. So I will continue to live my life with a camera in hand; capturing every and any moment I have the risk of forgetting. Thank you, Santiago.

Student Name: Tami Taiwo
Grade: 8
School: Killough Middle School
Title: Bionic Technology
Category: Critical Essay
Key: Silver Key
Educator:

Bionic Technology

People have benefited from technology in a variety of ways, with bionic technology being the most well-known. While prostheses help replace amputated limbs, implants also help people with disabilities regain their abilities. Unfortunately, this form of bionic technology is still in its infancy and won't be widely used by humans for years, or perhaps decades. However, the bionic technology that will improve the human body will give us powers that a regular human wouldn't be capable of. Bionic technology can be applied to either improve or repair human body damage, or even both.

These bionic limbs are not just for aesthetics; they are designed to function like a natural limb. With advanced sensors and computerized components, the wearer can control the limb with their thoughts and even receive tactile feedback. This has revolutionized the lives of amputees and individuals with physical disabilities, providing them with greater independence and mobility.

In other words, bionic limbs may replace missing bodily components and even restore damaged brain tissue. Consider the hippocampal chip, which is inserted into the hippocampus to treat brain tissue injuries. Along with suction cups, there are prosthetic limbs that may be surgically inserted (also known as an osseointegration limb replacement) to replace lost body parts like arms and legs.

On the other hand, bionic technology can improve our senses and physical capabilities. Though you might not be aware of it, bionic technology is all around us and contributes in little but significant ways. Consider the cochlea. The cochlear implant, which uses electrodes put in the cochlea of the inner ear to stimulate the auditory nerve, allows some people who are profoundly deaf to hear. A hearing aid is a device used to help people with hearing loss hear better by amplifying sound; thus, these are very different from hearing aids you see in everyday life. Athletes without a leg may run faster thanks to advanced I-limbs like the Cheetah carbon fiber, whose definition is "A specially designed, very effective carbon fiber foot used especially for sprinting."

Additionally, bionic technology is beneficial in both ways. Consider receiving a deep brain implant. Deep brain stimulators are devices that insert an electrode several inches into the brain. Deep brain stimulators are now employed to treat Parkinson's disease, but more recently, they have also been successfully tested for the treatment of severe

depression and obsessive compulsive disorder, with encouraging results. See? The implant assists in the treatment of Parkinson's disease and the improvement of happiness in depressed individuals. Even prostheses serve as a support for those without limbs and, in certain cases, improve some perceptions, such as touch.

In conclusion, the most well-known example of how technology has helped humans is bionics. Prosthetic limbs help replace amputated limbs, while implants help people with disabilities regain their abilities. The human body can be improved upon, repaired, or both thanks to modern bionic technology, although this period is still young. The development of bionic technology will continue for many more generations. More individuals will have access to this restricted technology as prices decline. As bionic technology continues to advance, the possibilities for its use are endless. From enhancing human abilities to treating medical conditions, bionics has the potential to transform the way we live and interact with the world around us.

Student Name: Tanisha Patel
Grade: 11
School: Kerr High School
Title: Bound by Branches
Category: Personal Essay & Memoir
Key: Silver Key
Educator: Kathy Harrison

Bound by Branches

It is 1 A.M. and I am in bed, heavy-eyed and drowsy. I close my eyes, attempting to drift into a deep slumber, as the melody of the heavy breeze rustles through the leaves outside, playing as my lullaby... SLAM! Suddenly I woke up abruptly in the middle of the night, as I quickly recognized the sound of slamming doors, and Mama and Baba arguing. I was quite familiar with this sound as my parents fought often. The argument drags on for what feels like hours, I wish I could just sink into my pillow and sleep peacefully for one night. I have always wished I could live in a normal household.

Things have always been this way, as my parents are bound by an arranged marriage, a common tradition in India. They never really got along, nor loved each other. Although my parents never looked into a divorce due to societal pressure against divorce in my country, sometimes it felt like my presence was the only thing keeping my parents together. I feel like a weight on my parent's shoulders, restricting them from happiness and freedom.

The tension in the house swells, and I am still struggling to sleep. My eyes begin to blur my vision as the argument downstairs intensifies.

Unable to fall into a slumber, I decide to go outside for some fresh air, slipping out of bed. I tip-toe to my window, cracking it open. I carefully climb out landing on the dewy grass as the crisp cool air blows my face-- it feels like freedom from the tension. I wander beneath the moon's soft glow, which lit up the autumn trees. I follow the sidewalk as the familiar melody of the heavy breeze rustles through the leaves play, as leaves fall one by one.

I know Mama and Baba meant well staying together for me and the reputation of our khandan. ¹ Although others may be happy about their parents staying together, I feel the burden of being the reason why parents can't be happy. It feels as if they are forced to live and deal with each other because of me. I am unable to see my parents living miserable, bound by their duties and what society thinks. Why does it feel like I am the reason for their unhappiness? Am I the problem? I don't think divorce is a burden, but it is

necessary sometimes. It's always outsiders telling my parents how I would feel if they divorced. Why is it always about me? What about my parents' happiness? Baba, if you really did ask how I felt, I would be more than glad to support you. Mama, I have never wanted anything more than for you to be happy. It shouldn't always be about me.

As I walk outside, near the trees, the same melody of the heavy breeze rustling through the leaves plays. I look up, enjoying the symphony of the autumn trees. I notice the leaves bound by branches blowing loose, dancing in the air. The leaves fly freely, almost dancing in the wind. I wish my parents were as free as these leaves.

However, some of the leaves remain bound, unaffected by the wind. These leaves were dried up and had a greyish-brown color. When a strong gust of wind eventually blew the leaves free of the branches, they did not dance as the colorful leaves did. Instead, the frail leaves sunk straight into the ground, collecting in piles with other dying leaves.

It seemed as if the tree was a reflection of my family. Branches bounding our family only worsened our relationship over time, just like the dried leaves on the branches, which eventually sank to the ground. It felt like the more my parents acted as if everything was okay, the situation continued to frail. I get that traditions are cherished and valuable, but why do I feel bound by them?

¹ Khandan meaning family or lineage in Hindi

Student Name: Tyler Nguyen
Grade: 11
School: Hastings High School
Title: Cadence of Death
Category: Short Story
Key: Silver Key
Educator: Parbattee Maharaj

Death. It comes for us all. Life begets death. And death is the end of all...

Ever since the dawn of time, Angels have ruled and enforced their teachings on the Blind, starting with their ancestors, the Primal Angels, who fabricated the realm of Purgatory to detach the soul from the body. Purgatory is filled with several districts, which are more prison-like in their stature. The central district, Ghurel, was formed by the Primal Angels using all their blessings to erect an all-mighty universal transporter that would teleport every Blind to Purgatory. Such a powerful transporter reduced their essences to nihility but spawned droves of the Blind to populate the realm. Ghurel, being the central district, is the first location where a Blind is sent after their mortal life has ended. Life — or rather, after-life — within such a prison is naught but suffering as the Blinds' wails reverberate throughout eternity without rest. The realm of Purgatory's atmosphere is proliferated with smoke, encompassing the bright, fiery world with a gray veil.

The light at the end of the tunnel is actually the flames of Purgatory, ready to engulf its subjects whole.

Is this really how I'm going to die? Everybody goes on about having their life flash before their eyes, but right now I can only think of you, James. Sprawled out on the bank's floor is Hosh, bullet-ridden and delirious. His blood stained the large majority of his white shirt from his shoulders down to his abdomen, pooling up behind him and tarnishing his cash-filled duffel bag.

It's so blurry.

My head is spinning.

I feel like I'm going to vomit.

I can't move.

I can hear everyone screaming.

Hosh's consciousness lapsed for tiny intervals, switching between sensations of unrelenting, numbing cold and the sharp, fiery twinges of pain. The once-loud clamor that surrounded him sounded like a whisper. Hosh's eyes slowly waned out, dwindling the little life it had left. Ah, everything's turning black.

Wait... there it is. The light at the end of the tunnel...

Suddenly, his numbness was met by unbearable heat and the desire to move; yet, his mobility was restricted. Clank Clank. Shackled from hands to feet, Hosh realized he was a prisoner.

“Where am—?!” His question was interrupted by the sheer pain caused by the blistering ground at any cost. Pure but savage flames licked the surface, condemning all the Blinds who walked it to prolonged agony. In one moment, his feet were almost entirely charred by the basalt, but upon another quick examination, his feet were completely healed back, ready to be charred once more. I think I get it. I’m in hell.

Unable to break into a sprint, the best he could manage was a desperate shimmy, looking for an end to the flames. I gotta get out of here. I don’t have time to waste when James’ very life is in danger every second I’m daddling here. There was seemingly no end, but then he witnessed a line of people entering a golden gate. As he got closer, he could see that the gate was supported by what appeared to be a marble base, intricately designed and embellished with angelic carvings. The gate stood insurmountable to all things before it.

He reached the entrance of the gate, noticing everyone’s ragged and torn clothing, comparing it to his own, which he had just now realized was the same.

A looming figure stops him. It’s a giant being of light, with its light only covered by its golden armor. Its head was wrapped with rings that had what looked like eyes, and its back had gargantuan white and feathery wings.

“Welcome, Blind one. You are not done yet. You are still impure. Your flesh, your possessions, your desires; they all muddy your essence. Leave them behind,” the figure says firmly. It pronounced the demand with such authority that Hosh couldn’t shake. It brought him down to his knees through words alone. Behind him, the other subjects had also dropped down in obedience.

The figure continued its introduction, unphased by the mass kneeling.

“Where you stand lies the grounds where you will shed your former self. You will follow the transformation of a Blind and march onwards. To Ghurel!”

The ginormous figure’s feathery wings unfurled their wings and took off to the top of the gate. Once the giant receded to a squinting speck, Hosh realized he was still kneeling; he got up trembling with the figure still ingrained in his mind. What was that— That thing, it’s not human. Why the hell is it calling us Blind? What am I supposed to do with this information? I need to get out of here and find my son!

Suddenly, the colossal golden gate slowly creaked open, revealing a horrific and inhumane sight. Ghurel, the central district where every Blind has come across, was more sickening than he would’ve ever thought. People of all shapes, color, and ages were being burned, including children. Held in separate cages made out of gold, they were roasted alive by flames of varying shades of goldenrod; he could see some of them squirming in pain, while others had no reaction. Their scorched skin regenerated in mere seconds, only to repeat the process once again. Not even LSD could explain what the hell I’m looking at

right now. Hosh thought, seeing that they all had featureless faces. No eyes. No mouths. No noses. Nothing.

What also caught his eye was that the empty cages burned pure white flames. Does that mean the white flames change colors when they burn someone? I guess they're burning our "impurities" away. But, why are they different shades? Are they more impure?

Hosh paused his analysis of the flames when he noticed the number of feathered winged figures above the cages. They stood with poise, looking down upon the burning victims, staring intently, making sure everything went according to plan. One of them dove down in front of the new prisoners and began speaking in a sonorous voice, resonating throughout the area.

"Here is the first sector of Ghurel, the Possession Sector." The being gestured towards the horrific sight, "What you see before you is called the Cleanse. It removes the distinction permanently made when you filthy Blind are born. You will be cleansed of your identity. You will not be able to remember your name, your family, your wealth, your property. You are no longer of the flesh, such things do not matter anymore. Any Blind who attempts to resist must endure the flames for longer. It will be excruciatingly painful if you do, so do not bother with changing the inevitable; you WILL give in." The figure said with finality. Hosh was in disbelief. He wanted to convince himself that this was just a bad dream, maybe that he was in a coma, but no. That belief crumbled, making him face reality. No.

Nono!!!

I don't want to be like them, the faceless people! I have to make it back for James. My son— he was still held hostage before I came here. I couldn't call the police, they have moles everywhere! Even though I sold everything, I didn't have enough money for the ransom in time. I had no choice but to rob a bank, which left me here— dead. Am I supposed to forget about all of this?! My son is still out there!

His mind raced, the entire negative emotional spectrum hitting him like a freight train. Rage, worry, grief, hopelessness, and most importantly, fear consumed him. The uncertain fate of his son being the cause.

The being continued with its explanation.

"Each Blind will be assigned a combination of numbers and a letter by Mind Angels, your cell numbers. Once a Blind has received their cell numbers, they are to make their way to their designated locations for the Cleanse. The Mind Angels will imprint the directions into your subconscious, so just trust your instincts. May it be warned that if a Blind does not enter their designated location in time, they will be sent straight to Hell by the Enforcement Angels, regardless of what you have done in your life."

Hosh couldn't do it, he couldn't just forget his son.

I don't care if I have to endure an eternity of pain. Losing my son again? Not happening. I have to stay strong. For him.

He solidified his decision and mentally prepared himself for the endless agony ahead. He heard a solemn voice being directed straight to his inner thoughts.

[39184P. Head to the designated location, Blind one.]

It was so sudden that Hosh jumped. He felt as though he should walk forward, as if pulled by a rope. Following his instincts, he treaded onward. As he walked, he was disgusted by the innumerable amount of Blind being caged and constantly burned. Some still had their faces intact, screaming till their vocal chords tore, but of course they regenerated back. An endless cacophony of wails filled Hosh's ears.

I can do this. I can do this... Seeing so many people suffering, Hosh wavered in his decisions minutes ago. His palms started sweating and doubts filled his mind. They will have to let me go eventually, right? They'll see that I'm that stubborn. But can I really hold out until then, or will I be just like the rest?

Before Hosh knew it, he was before a cage himself. On the ground plastered his cell number: 39184P. There was a small hole to enter the cage and below it seemed the activation to completely encircle the cage with its bars. He headed into the golden cage breathing anxiously.

Hosh's senses were heightened and his breath rapidly increased. Abruptly, white flames flickered into life below him. Instantaneously, a singeing pain erupted throughout his entire body and he embraced it. The flames turned goldenrod as he endured the agony that assailed his body. Clenching his teeth and tightening his fist, he was thinking of only one thing— JAMES!

Time passed. He tried to stay strong, but the flames wore him down, breaking his seemingly steadfast spirit.

Who am I? What am I? Why do I feel like I'm forgetting something important? Really important. I feel empty. My heart aches, but I can't fathom why. And what are these blobs of color? My vision— it's different. Hosh glanced around, only seeing a mixture of colors that wobbled like water sloshing around. Though he never had vision like this before, it seemed intuitive, with meanings and ideas automatically incorporated into his mind upon simply looking at something. His instincts told him what he was looking at, even if he didn't know himself.

Moving his limbs, a raspy voice suddenly entered his mind, [You are to head to Epithumia, or else you stay with the rest of the wretched Blind scum. You have been granted the Vision of Soul and Essence. Do not waste it here.]

It's a Mind Angel. The voice is different, but my instincts- they're being tugged like before. Hosh instinctually headed towards a spot of green in the distance, noticing a string of white blob attached to him. What is this? Is that how they send thoughts to my mind? So these are souls, huh? We're directly linked. I can see everything! I feel enlightened. No wonder they called us Blind before.

As he walked, he heard shrieks that pervaded his ears but he could only see yellow-whiteish blobs that he assumed were Blinds wiggling around. He felt unsympathetic for them. They were inferior. They couldn't see what he could see.

He reached Epithumia without wasting a beat. Blobs of pure white and a tinge of yellow white covered the area. What caught Hosh's eyes was a skyscraper-sized green blob that flickered like a flame. Green. He blanked out. The green essence felt old. Beyond old— as if it was there since the creation of Purgatory. His mind was overwhelmed, and could only briefly remember a few words a white blob muttered, "relinquish... desires... burdens to... soul..."

Green. His desires— they swelled hectically as he dazedly sauntered toward the vast and mighty green blob-flame. In mere moments, he was engulfed in it, unable to resist its temptations.

It's pitch black. I can't see anything. I don't feel anything either. Am I floating or falling? In the distance, he saw blobs of every color were forming to fabricate something in the pitch black world. It was a manifestation. A manifestation of his desires fulfilled.

Money. I can finally live without working. What a blessing...

She's alive from the car crash. Thank the Lord...

Who's that boy? He's safe and sound and cheerfully playing with his friends... I don't know why, but I feel as if I can die in peace now.

He was lost in his desires, content with the life before him. However, it wasn't real; it was merely a fabrication of his desires.

Without warning, the dark world was invaded by the ancient green blob. It took the world by storm and unmercifully encroached on the mixtures of blobs bit by bit. It rapaciously swallowed the blobs, devouring each and every desire Hosh had...

By the time Hosh realized it, he was tossed out of the pitch black world. His mind was empty. He seemed lifeless; maybe because he no longer had a reason to live. He no longer had any desire. He was but a shell of his former self.

That green thing is approaching me. Oh well...

He stopped moving, letting the ravages of time take him. The gray world never changed once. Howls of wind and white-tinged smoke shifted him a bit here and there, but it was negligible. That negligible distance, however, turns substantial over eons of time.

Eventually, how ever long it took, he felt a supreme presence that demanded his attention. He slovenly glimpsed around, noticing a bright, pure light dead center of Ghurel. The thick ray of light stretched all the way to the skies and seemed to pierce the Heavens. He subconsciously plodded towards it— the light. Something within him, intangible and indescribable, felt the need to go towards the light. The feeling was

fundamentally different from the time when the green blob attracted him. The green blob pulled his inner desires while the light tugged on his soul, and his soul willingly followed. Nearing the white beam of pure light, his eyes captured the attention of a small, white blob. Intuitively, he knew it was a whistle. The shapeless blob started shifting its shape to a white, majestic whistle that had carvings of three wings on either side, embellished with golden traces outlined. God. He was mesmerized by how perfect it was. It was made to be worshiped and praised to the most lofty of heights possible. He inched closer and closer, till he was at arm's length; his hand reached out, shaking with awe to touch the whistle essence.

The moment Hosh touched a tiny spec of the whistle, everything flipped to darkness. He fell to pitch-black nothingness and kept falling. Another abyss. He kept himself still, not caring what was happening around him. He felt cold as if he was left in the blizzards buck naked for days. All of a sudden, like flipping a switch, the darkness turned bright. Light covered everything and enveloped him in a warm sensation. Within his sight was nothing but light. A blink later, the world changed once again. The world was colored half-and-half between black and white. The mixture of sensations had him quivering and in discomfort. Suddenly, a figure appeared before him. His vision didn't see it in a blob, but rather a figure with layers of sublime angelic wings half-colored black and half-colored white. It wore a simple white toga to accentuate its simple but majestic bearing, and what floated atop its head was a jet-black halo that was darker than the deepest pits. Its heterochromic eyes black and white stared at him without reserve before slowly opening its mouth. "Faceless and Sighted one— you are between the gateways between Heaven and Hell. I am Mortis, the one and only Impartial Angel. Are there any questions before I decide your fate?" Mortis asked, without changing tones, nor moving his eyes.

"Whistle..." Hosh hoarsely rasped.

"That— that is me in physical form. Now then, in my judgment, you are ascending. Faceless and Sighted one— you have walked on the surface of Purgatory longer than any I have ever felt, aside from us Angels. An indistinguishable regret and loss emanate from your soul. May your pure and restless soul rest in the Heavens," Mortis locked eyes with him before rotating his halo. The world twisted in color, creating an eternal vortex loop that increased in spinning. At its center was Mortis and both his eyes slowly turned golden-white.

The Impartial Angel brought its hand into the vortex and turned his hand counter-clockwise. *Tick*.

A bright light covered the world and a simple yet divine gate appeared. Hosh gravitated towards the gate and a tinge of yellow covered his vision.

In Hosh's last moments, right before going through the gate, he saw a boy.

The boy smiled. He smiled back.

Then white filled his vision.

A sharp but delicate whistle echoed throughout the Heavens. Violins and organs accompanied the melody of the whistle.
Oh... I'm finally free, aren't I.

Student Name: Olivia Nguyen

Grade: 11

School: Kerr High School

Title: Clay Bodies

Category: Flash Fiction

Key: Silver Key

Educator: Ayn Nys

In the beginning, humans were powerful beings. Connected at the back, with four arms and four legs; even the gods feared their power. Males were children of the Sun, females were children of the Earth; but in a horrible, deafening flash; they were separated. It was a terrible fate, but was it deserved? Humans were molded by Prometheus to be arrogant and selfish. Just as Pandora's curiosity betrayed her, their own greedy qualities caused their demise. Being greater than the gods is something that they would have achieved. Now we are stuck. Longing for something that isn't guaranteed.

"Honey, I'm home" I whispered wistfully. Cold silence returned my calls. My leather shoes clicked on the tiles as I walked into the dark apartment. Home smelled like home, but didn't feel like it... not without Emma.

Waves. Waves of longing washed over me as I stared into the misty sea. I needed something to keep my mind on, something that would distract me from him. My leg shook in anticipation, almost uncontrollably. Being in the sand brought me closest to the Earth, but farthest from my Sun. The daylight was nowhere to be seen, somber clouds veiling it from my view. Samuel is my first and only love; unlike the clouds, his face never fogs from my eyes. Up above, the sky rumbled and the waves crashed louder, tuning themselves to my thoughts.

I remember meeting her, I was immediately infatuated. She once asked why I did not remember where or when we met, but I just felt like I had known her my whole life. Emma's presence was as eternal as the Earth. Staring at the swirling steam from the coffee mug, her memory lingers all around the house. A pink feathered hat sat on the coat rack, frozen foods left untouched, warm memories sealed inside.

Lifting myself up from the pillowy sand- I reminisce. I asked Samuel if he remembered when we met; I pretended to remember, but I couldn't, and neither did he. In reality, he

had always been a part of my life, even when he wasn't physically there. Together, we were as elusive as the shells swept up by the waves, the two never meant to be separated. Memories of us apart only resurfaced in times like these.

Her hands would sweep the coat off of me, gently brushing my neck. Up went the coat, placed neatly on the rack as she always would. The mahogany wood stands tall, empty. Her touch, lost in the salty breeze, but never off of my yearning skin.

Carefully steadying myself on a slippery, washed-up log, I slowly make my way to the ocean. Life felt like a balancing act with him. I wanted to pour myself wholly, to him and only him, but wishes for a better life kept us both busy. Slipping into the warm water, I'm reminded of his cozy, protective embrace. Together, we felt molded as one.

Echoes etched the walls as regret seeped in; like rain dripping into the bucket. Plink...plink... plink... as each drip hit the metal pail, the tightness in my heart wined itself up. I wondered if I had jumped too impulsively and drove her away. We had been separated by desires that brought earthly satisfaction- not by the supernatural. I knew that I had made a mistake.

The water felt like a release from the pressure had squeezed and shaped me. I swam further and further out into the depths of unfamiliar territory. The experience was exhilarating and new yet, something felt wrong. My other half was missing, the large part of me that had been cleaved into something new, gone from my life. My clay body quickly dissolved in the turbulent waters. Gasping for air I thrashed and kicked, helpless to the strong beating of the waves. The sting of the salt reminded me of my Sun, Samuel.

I ran outside, rain sizzling on my skin. I felt the burn of my soulmate, melting away. Emma... The pavement splashed as I ran to her, somehow knowing exactly where she was. I knew that if I had stopped or changed my mind, for only half a second; there would be no one to return to.

He's coming... I thought as the warm water enveloped me. This isn't where I belong. I knew that if I stayed longer, there would be no chance of seeing him ever again. As I looked up, the water dappled, shifting lines of light emerged, reminding me of his smiling face as the sunbeams washed over it in the morning. Slowly the water got warmer and warmer as the shaft of light emerged through the silky folds.

The freezing rain meant nothing anymore, my own anger warmed me from the inside. My skin felt hot, light emerging through the pores. How could I leave her? Her footsteps were the only traces she left in the sand. I ran swiftly towards the foamy surf, I heard the crashing sounds of the tide, and nothing else. An oak log swayed gently on the somber shore.

My vision dims, I reach my arms up and kick; fighting against the murky depths. Like a flash of lightning, his arms pull me up and out of the water. He brings me back to his warm embrace. Sun and Earth reunited.

The myth never explained what happened when soulmates found each other again. Perhaps being separated by choice only made their love for each other stronger. Molded from the same clay, they shall return.

Student Name: Jefferson Hernandez

Grade: 11

School: Hastings High School

Title: Death Row

Category: Poetry

Key: Silver Key

Educator: Parbattee Maharaj

Death Row

As the shadows grow and darkness falls, I stand at the point where life comes to a halt.

Reflections wash over my tired thoughts, moments imprinted in time, fate linked.

Lost days, decisions made, courses not pursued, regret fills each breath.

I reflect on the events that brought me here.

The shared laughter, the tears cried.

Choices taken in haste are now carved in time and may not be erased.

The ticking clock's hand echoes in the cell, measuring time's final thread.

Regrets blossom like flowers in bloom.

I want to recover, exhume certain moments.

The people I've injured, the bridges I've burnt, the lessons I've learned too late, now discerned.

In the darkest hour,

Whispers of hope linger, yearning for release.

A spark of optimism amidst the chaos in this dark and narrowing route.

Redemption's whisper

I confront the reality with a sad heart, Glimpses of light in the murky art.

Seeking forgiveness at the dying hour,

Desiring peace and the power of kindness.

As dusk fades toward twilight,

A soul finds peace by embracing the final night.

In the passageways where fate's hands guide, I deal with the echoes, the ebb, and the tide.

Contemplating acts, a soul deprived bare, a person, now free,

From the chains of earthly pain,

Ascends to the light.

Student Name: Basit Salami

Grade: 9

School: Kerr High School

Title: Embracing Uniqueness: My Remarkable Fingers

Category: Personal Essay & Memoir

Key: Silver Key

Educator: Safraz Ali

Life is like a big puzzle, where each person is a unique piece, adding something special to the grand picture of existence. For me, what sets me apart is something quite unusual: the remarkable flexibility of my fingers. They're not your usual fingers; they move in ways that surprise and astonish. Their ability to bend and stretch is different from what most fingers can do, and it adds a unique rhythm to my life.

Ever since I was small, my fingers were different. While my friends struggled with small tasks, I discovered that my fingers had a knack for moving in unexpected ways. They were more flexible than others' allowing me to bend and twist them in ways that seemed a bit odd but were fascinating. One day at school, during a game of "Simon Says, the teacher asked us to do something tricky by touching our little fingers to our palms. It seemed impossible for most kids, but I did it easily! My classmates were amazed at how my fingers moved, almost as if they were magic. As I grew older, my unique fingers became my trademark. Whether I was showing them off to friends or using their flexibility to entertain, they always drew attention.

People found it fascinating but sometimes a little strange. With time, I learned that my different fingers weren't just a cool trick. They taught me to celebrate what makes me stand out. Just like my fingers didn't follow the usual rules, I began challenging what society expected of me and embracing my uniqueness. In a world that often wants everyone to be the same, my flexible fingers became a symbol of celebrating what makes us different. They showed me that our unique qualities aren't limitations; they're strengths that set us apart from others. Now, my fingers remind me every day that extraordinary things can come from unexpected places. They're not just fingers anymore, they're a symbol of pride proof that being a little different can be a wonderful thing. Here's to the fingers that can do what others can't a reminder that in a world where everyone wants to fit in, there's amazing beauty in embracing what makes us unique. From the time I was small, my fingers stood out. While my pals struggled with simple tasks, I noticed my fingers could move unexpectedly. They were extra flexible, letting me bend and twist them in ways that seemed peculiar yet captivating. One day in school during a game, the teacher challenged us to a task: touching our little fingers to our palms. It seemed impossible for most kids, but I did it effortlessly! My classmates gawked in amazement at my fingers' fluid movements, almost like magic.

As I grew, my unique fingers became my thing. Whether impressing friends or entertaining with their flexibility, they always drew attention. People found it fascinating but sometimes a bit odd. Over time, I learned that my different fingers weren't just a cool trick. They taught me to celebrate what makes me stand out. Just like my fingers didn't follow the usual rules, I began challenging society's expectations and embracing my individuality. In a world pushing for sameness, my bendy fingers became a symbol of celebrating uniqueness. They showed me that our special qualities aren't limitations they're strengths that set us apart from the crowd. Today, my fingers remind me that remarkable things can come from unexpected places. They're not just fingers anymore; they're a badge of pride - proof that being a tad different can be a wonderful thing. Here's to the fingers that do what others can't a reminder that in a world seeking uniformity, there's incredible beauty in embracing what makes us unique.

Student Name: Megan Luong
Grade: 12
School: Elsie High School
Title: Enduring Womanhood.
Category: Personal Essay & Memoir
Key: Silver Key
Educator:

“Con không thể đeo băng vệ sinh,” my mom whispers faintly -despite the door closed- as she folds my cluttered sweaters into orderly stacks. This statement directly translates to, “Child, you cannot wear a tampon.” It was the summer of my sophomore year, and my mom’s friend invited us to go swimming with her family, but I just got my period. As one would expect, slapped with objection and misery, I welp out of the ten-by-ten square foot room and slumped on the couch, sinking into the leather. “Megan, get ready!”, my brother, Bryan, says eagerly. “Megan’s sick. She isn’t able to go with us, con!” my mom shouts from the room – a statement, concise yet vague for shielding seemingly “private” matters. This was the immediate relief she turned to when the social scale read discomfort. Witnessing this reaction from my mom wasn’t unusual. Then again, she is a conservative woman who grew up in a strict household with stringent parents, believing in maintained traditions, which proved insurmountable to my unorthodox request: asking to use a tampon.

Shame. My first period was when my shameful instincts appeared: sliding a pad underneath my sleeve when excusing myself to use the restroom. If I knew my period would start within a few days, I would wear sweaters prior to “the day” – a security blanket that gave me the vast capacity to execute “secretive” movements in relation to my private matters.

It brings prodigious ignominy to me even to this day, but to a blunt and fundamental extent, I was embarrassed to accept my menstrual cycle, to accept that from December 18th, 2019, I would have to countenance knife-stabbing cramps, unrelenting hormonal imbalances, unwavering physical exhaustion, and spontaneous blackouts that chaperone a cycle. It saddened me deeply to witness families commemorate the invigorating commencement of womanhood as if it were a celebratory juncture because, in my family, the emergence of womanhood is kept hidden on the unembellished basis that womanhood is composed of effable, multiplex abstractions.

For a time, I pondered why blurting out such words as “I’m on my period!” was such a profane and sacrilegious act to which my mom had to utilize secret codes. After all, they were just words – letters placed together to form a meaning or even several meanings. If not for Coach Lightener and the life lessons that illuminated the vacant and unproclaimed freshman I exhibited, I don’t think I would ever have deciphered the trajectory to the meaning of selling oneself short. When I did, however, engulfed and digested the idea behind those words, I found that they connected most and were strongly associated with hindrances of womanhood.

Elizabeth Cady Stanton once said, “The best protection any woman can have is courage,” but what protection did I harbor when all of her efforts led to me sliding a pad up my sleeve and being silent when I conversate about feminine issues with those who shame me for releasing blood? To answer that in a simple yet nonchalant manner, I would say none because, for a portion of my life, I exhibited a lack of courage - and was more so ashamed – when the talk of womanhood and natural bodily processes surfaced.

Inflamed. As inflamed as I was about embarrassment controlling my life, an impulse hit me, guiding me into the room where my mom and brother stood. I mutilate the security blanket accompanying all feelings of shame. With that, I exclaimed, “I’m on my period!”. Laughter and disgusted expressions eroded the room, but it was then I realized that having a say, a voice, an opinion – one in which I will seek the salvation of womanhood to shine a light on those that suffer behind closed doors, to corrode the unyielding and absolute boundaries women must live by without their consent – was worth the price of humiliation.

Student Name: Addison Beauban
Grade: 10
School: Alief Taylor High School
Title: Fashion Designer Dream
Category: Personal Essay & Memoir
Key: Silver Key
Educator: Zainab Jabak

When I first started middle school, I started off at a school called St. Francis De Sales. It was a private school that was gated around the property. We had an enormous field and a comprehensive school and a church. I can not remember much, but I remember when I was in 7th grade where COVID was around and students had to stay inside and do classes online. Halfway through my 7th grade year online, my parents placed me in another middle school called O'Donnell. O'Donnell brought many new things into my life, such as new teachers and classmates that my old middle school did not have. I made a few mistakes because I was switching from a private school to a public school.

Eventually making it to 8th grade where I was in-person. Being able to see the different hallways that O'Donnell had got me confused and very desperate to find my classes. During my middle school years, I have formed friendships with many new people that have endured long after middle school. Among all my classes, AVID stood out to me the most. This is because AVID helped me find out what I want for my majors and what I want to do in life. My passion for dressing up and matching colors, resulted in me majoring in fashion design. Fashion design is where you create outfits that could affect trends in the fashion industry. I've always loved to combine colors and know which color goes with other colors. I knew that fashion design is not easy to go through since it causes stress and a lot of knowledge to have, but I was determined to try my best. My AVID teacher was supportive of my idea and he was talking about colleges that offered a fashion design major for me.

During my first year in high school I was conflicted between being a fashion designer or a makeup artist, even though they are almost alike and help each other out. After a lot of research, I decided to go with my first major which was fashion design. Since I was stuck with the fashion design major, I decided to watch a lot of stuff that included fashion design, and include mechanics to see if it was possible to combine those two together to make a piece. A lot of fashion designers have crazy ideas about their designs and it comes out as a success for most of them. I have always wondered what goes through the creative process in these designs, do they just go by their daily lives and find new stuff that turns to designs, or do they take inspiration from other designers and improve them. Looking at all the designs, designers really make me shocked at how creative they can be

and put the time and effort into their designs, getting the fabric, gems, and lights. As well as taking their time during school to learn how to sew and color match.

Almost every day, I wonder how fashion designers came to where they are now, what sacrifices did they make to get where they are and how long it took them to get this far. With the help of all my middle school teachers and freshman year teachers, they helped me learn what I wanted to learn to do in the future and make an impact in fashion design.

Student Name: Hayden Ha
Grade: 8
School: Albright Middle School
Title: Fly Away
Category: Flash Fiction
Key: Silver Key
Educator: Megan Kelly

"I'm sorry but we're going to have to take her off of life support," said Dr. Livingston. Aethra knew this day ought to come but she didn't want it to happen so soon. It was a childish fantasy of Aethra to think maybe one day her mom wouldn't need the life support, they could laugh with each other on the porch once more, she could drop her off to school, or she would attend her graduation ceremony. After all, her mom was the biggest supporter of her dreams compared to her dad. Her dad didn't even come to the hospital. In reality, Aethra hadn't even seen him in the past month. Did it upset her? Of course, it did, but she'd rather have no support than her lackluster dad. She barely made enough money to keep the heartbeat of her mom alive but to think she would have to take her off forever felt like a sick joke. The day she had to say goodbye to her mom for eternity became the day she felt trapped. Trapped in grief. There was no way out of it, she convinced herself there wasn't. As she watched her mom's lifeless body lying there, a piece of her was also lying with her.

The following weeks came and it showcased Aethra was in a slump. Although she made progress in getting out of bed and continuing her daily routine, life continued offbeat. Until one day, Aethra passed by the park and saw a group of kids. A group of kids holding these sparkling twinkles in their eyes. Something about it entranced Aethra as she stopped by and saw they were making paper airplanes. Paper airplanes made with chattering and laughter as the kids tried to see which one flew the farthest. It reminded her of her mom. She remembered how her mom once told her she wanted to become a pilot but couldn't due to complications within her family. Wholly, it fascinated Aethra, fascinated at how much fun they were having and how a simple, delicate sheet of paper could produce an object as such. From the moment she got home, she scrambled to find a blank piece of paper and tried to make a paper airplane by scratch. Of course, this was no easy task as she was quite confused about what to do after folding the paper in half. For hours, she would take a new sheet of paper and try a different combination of folding the paper but could never quite get it. Soon, it started to look like a melted snowball. From that day forward she wanted to figure out how to make a paper airplane. Throughout the week, it helped motivate her so that when she got home she worked on the paper airplane. It felt like somewhat of a closure for her and an opportunity for her to start healing.

This process kept on repeating itself until one morning. Aethra had a dream where she saw her mom waiting for her on the porch again. All she wanted to do was to have fun with her mom one more time, to sit down and tell her about her day. However, this wasn't possible because as soon as Aethra tried to sit down next to her mom, she suddenly stood up and started wandering somewhere else. Aethra didn't want her mom to go so soon so she followed her into the vast depths of the familiar world. Again and again, she chased her mom calling out to her or trying to catch up to her; however, she remained unphased. At one point, her mom was out of sight. It reminded Aethra of how she still had a long way to go when grieving. Moreover, the whole dream felt like Aethra was chasing a paper airplane. That's it! Aethra would continue to make paper airplanes until she could finally fly one. When it was time to let go. Let go of all the tears and emotions of how it felt like the world was against her.

One day walking home, Aethra saw the group of kids once more. Their colored paper airplanes with decorations, oh how she wished she could feel like them for once. While watching closely, she saw one of the kids start making another paper airplane. It was surprisingly simple, she was making it harder than it needed to be, she realized. As she got home, she thought today would be the day when she would finally make the paper airplane. Without a doubt, she felt like a child again. She brought out her old crayons and doodled like a 3rd grader. When she finished she felt fulfilled but couldn't bring herself to fly it. She proceeded to write a letter pouring her heart out along with the frustrations she felt against her dad. Then, she attached this lengthy letter to the paper airplane as the final piece. The day after, she walked to the park and planned to finally fly it. There was a strong gust of wind which made the clouds to appear as if they were on the brink of crying. This was it, the days of her struggling would finally have some significance. As she took in a deep breath she took a step back, put the paper airplane in position ready to go, and gave it a vigorous throw. At that moment, the paper airplane would be long gone as the strong gusts of wind blew it out of the park, quite literally. What Aethra did next could be dumb to countless, as she started chasing it. Chasing it to the point her surroundings weren't important to her. As the honking of the car soon faded away, she smiled to herself.

Student Name: Adeola Badejo
Grade: 8
School: O'Donnell Middle School
Title: Forwarded
Category: Short Story
Key: Silver Key
Educator: Kaneisha Hicks

"We are now in lockdown, barricade your doors." said the AP over the intercom. I could hear the fear in her voice as I heard gunshots from all directions. "I was going to the bathroom. No class was going to let me in" I say to myself. "They wouldn't trust it, I wouldn't trust myself either." I look around as I hear the screams through the hallways. They're getting closer, the gunshots get louder. I ran as fast as I could, looking for anywhere to hide. Ahead I could see a gun, Frantically I grabbed it and shot at the person chasing me.

Your call has been forwarded to voicemail

11:30 pm, April 23rd,

It's been a few hard days without you Grace. I'm finally talking to you after it happened. I kept re-reading our text messages over and over. I'm crying again. Please come back, Grace. Come back and laugh, make a joke like you used to. Tell me this was all a lie. "Gotcha!" That's all you have to say, Grace.

Your call has been forwarded to voicemail

11:30 pm, April 25th,

I..went to your funeral today Grace. I couldn't stop crying. Grace everyone misses you why don't you just come back to us? I'm still in shock at what happened. I can't do this without you. We were supposed to stick together?You promised. I keep trying to lie to myself that nothing happened. Every day I wake up and go straight to your house, and as I get there a dawn of realization hits.

Your call has been forwarded to voicemail

11:30 pm, April 27th

I'm sorry I haven't been updating you lately. My family is going through some things right now. 7 days since the incident. That's 1 week without you. Things are surely moving fast without you. They canceled school after the incident. Happy about that. It allows me to grieve about you.

Your call has been forwarded to voicemail

11:30 pm, April 30th

It's the end of the month. You were very close to making it. You're on the News though! You wanted to be famous and here you are..for the wrong reasons but you made it Grace. Your name is known everywhere now... Well, not everywhere but you get it..?That's the thing about you. You always understood what I meant even when I didn't.

Your call has been forwarded to voicemail

11:30 pm, May 3rd

It's a new month. It's been 13 days without you. Yes, I was counting, each day felt like hell. The whole neighborhood knew how close we were. Everywhere I go I get stares from everywhere telling me how sorry they are for me. They give me pitiful looks and it makes me sick. I don't want to be reminded every day how I lost you. Now I just curl up in my room waiting for this hell to end.

Your call has been forwarded to voicemail

11:30 pm, May 6th

They've confirmed that school is officially starting on May 25th. I can't believe they're just going to act like nothing happened and resume school 1 month later. It's shameful. I know I didn't want to be reminded about your death but 1 month is too short a time for anyone. Many people died that day. Once again they're sweeping it under the rug and pretending. Like they always do.

Your call has been forwarded to voicemail

11:30 pm, May 9th

I'm starting to hate school. I don't think I'm ready to go back yet. The date is nearing every day, so I will have to get used to the looks. Once school starts the cycle begins but this time with pitiful looks. Unbearable...Going back without you, sleeping, waking up, Going to school, Coming home, Homework repeat. I can't do that without you. I miss you. I miss our late-night talks. I miss our "study" sessions. Trying to get homework done but you would just end up distracting me.

Your call has been forwarded to voicemail

10:45 pm, May 15th

I'm early this time, I know. I just wanted to talk. I feel guilty, Grace. I couldn't stop thinking about that moment. I should've never picked up the gun. Grace, Please I was reckless and stupid. It was chaotic and I couldn't see. All I saw were people screaming and running around me. I saw a gun and I picked it up. I couldn't see and shot at the first person. I know you aren't here anymore but I need to say something about it. My parents aren't home right now, this is the only quiet time I can get to confess. I couldn't sleep after that day. The guilt is eating me alive. I was hoping this would make me feel better because it was like I was calling and speaking to you. All it did was make me feel worse. This empty silence surrounds my home and me just talking to someone who isn't even here anymore...I sound crazy right now. Grace, I'm scared I don't want to go to jail. I didn't

mean to... But they wouldn't understand. They wouldn't understand how close we are, or how close I am to snapping. I really can't do this. All of this would've never happened if we both skipped that day.

Your call has been forwarded to voicemail

11:30 pm, May 18th

School is getting closer. I'll have to deal with these looks again.

Your call has been forwarded to voicemail

11:30 pm, May 21st

I tried sending a text message today. It of course went green. I liked it though, it made me happy texting you even if you weren't reading it. It felt nice... for a while at least.

Your call has been forwarded to voicemail

11:30 pm, May 25th

School started today and of course, I got pity looks. Some people approached me and I saw flowers at your seat..that was nice.

11:30 pm, May 28th

"Hello? Who is this?" someone replied on the phone. I stayed silent, shocked that someone picked up. "They already gave her number out.." I thought to myself. "If you don't respond I'm ending this phone call." said the random person I snapped back to reality "This was my best friend's number she passed and I was calling her but they gave her number out it seems.."

"Oh...I'm so sorry to hear that," they replied. "You can keep "calling" her. I'll just not pick up if it makes you feel better after your loss." "Thank you" I responded.

knock knock

I heard a knock at the door and rushed to open it.

"You're under arrest! hands behind your back." I move my hands behind my back scared. "What's going on officer?!" said my parents. "You have the right to remain silent. Anything you say will be used in court." said the officer. "I said what's going on, officer." said my angry dad. "Your daughter has been charged with the murder of Grace Adams." He replied. "What? My daughter wouldn't do that. Grace was her best friend. She would never. Grace Adams died in a School Massacre. It wasn't Eleanor." I stayed silent knowing I was very guilty. I racked my brain trying to understand what was going on. How did they know? Does the whole school know? Including the neighborhood? Am I going to jail? Will everyone know me as the girl who killed her own best friend? I ignored the commotion in the back racking my head with these thoughts. I get pulled into the cop's car as my parents continue arguing with the officer trying to plead my case.

"It was her..." I think to myself. "The random girl who picked up probably listened to the voicemail and saw the one of me confessing... But how did the cops know? It doesn't make sense. I didn't tell anyone...Unless someone saw it?" I rack my brain with these thoughts trying to understand how.

I was taken to the police station for questioning. They had solid proof... I couldn't win this case. "Somewhere in my mind I kind of feel like I deserved it. I killed my own best friend, I'm a terrible person so I deserve it." I said to myself. I purposely went to the trial willingly. Of course, news spread fast about it and I was bombarded with questions left and right as I left the court. "Was it all an accident?" "Why would you kill your best friend?" "Was there any ulterior motive? Like jealousy?" "Have you killed anyone else?"

The questions all sound stupid to me. They're treating me like I'm some insane person who purposely killed their best friend. They don't get it of course—I didn't kill her on purpose; it was an accident. They asked me so many times if I killed my own best friend on purpose that now I'm starting to question myself... "am I a bad person who did it on purpose while manipulating myself into thinking they're not...?" These thoughts roamed through my mind the whole time. I get pulled into the police car to avoid the reporters... "We were heading to prison. I deserved it."

"Hey, wake up." "Get out" I look around still in the car.. "we've finally made it.." "Not the best place I want to stay for long.. it looks like something out of an apocalypse.." "I'm pretty sure the officer could see my look and could tell what I was thinking. He smirked as he saw it. He was probably happy." "someone like me deserves a jail like this" I could tell that's what he was thinking. I could tell even he thought of me as a terrible person

They were searching me up and down like they were looking for gold... How bad do they think of me? If they're treating me like this, how are the other prisoners going to treat me...?

Your call has been forwarded to voicemail

??? ???

Hi Grace.. They let me make a call for the day... I don't know the date or time. Seems like I've been spending too much time here. I can't take this in here. The officers scowl at us like we're monsters. Some of us made mistakes but they don't want to accept that. Some deserve to be in here. I need something to get out of here. I just need to leave. Anyway I can...

My body feels...

My body feels nothing.

Thump—Thump— — —Thump— — —Thump

Thump— — — — —Thump.

Am I sinking?.. I'm going downwards.

I didn't mean to kill her! It was an accident. Please don't send me down.

My body is still sinking.

Student Name: Estrella Chavez

Grade: 9

School: Kerr High School

Title: Future Shoes

Category: Poetry

Key: Silver Key

Educator: Safraz Ali

My shoes are clean and bright
Their so clean that you can see
The white in the night
Yes, white that catches your eyes
Puts a smile on your face
That will make you say
Their brighter than the time of day

Oh, what about the black ones you ask
Ya those look untouched
Creaseless that they look like nobody
Has ever spend a day on them
No bent on them
Inside sole so comfortable that you can sleep with them

What about his shoes
You see the dirt from the sides
The sides makes you realized
The work
The time
The same shoe for over five years
Losing its color and fading its designs

To give his treasures their wants and needs
That leaves him happy
To him every shoe can do
Even if it is twisted and over used
At the end of the day he is doing it for his treasures
Not new shoes

What about hers?
The ones that are losing their grip

Where she can slip
Insides with soles so thin
A pressureless knife can go through it
Now you see she almost can't do it

She is a woman, so why try
Her shoes should be clean
Clean and making her an inch high
Well she still tries because she is strong inside
To be able to provide every time she hears
"Can you buy me something please?"
To end up being satisfied

I started grasping knowledge as the time passed by
Motivating myself that I can change their lives
So that has been my goal this entire time
Cause I want to provide
Provide shoes with a future inside
A future knowing I did not disappoint them in life

When I make it to that point
Which will come true
I know that people will try to pull me down
Though you didn't know how I grew
Reminding myself how it left a scar and a bruise
But at the end of the day they don't know what is like
To walk a mile in my shoes

Student Name: Lena Bui
Grade: 9
School: Kerr High School
Title: Goodbye; Peculiar Writer
Category: Poetry
Key: Silver Key
Educator: Safraz Ali

My eyes on the words of a chronicle placed upon my face,
Educator preaches the unacknowledged to those near to my space.
Usually in the warmth of this hut I am placed heat down into the duties assigned
by those I call beloved.
In return, met with the silence of a simple murmur before I am yet again at stage one.
Pages of duties torn to the seams of none of these professors do come undone.
Yet again, here I am replaced in the appearance of the same blood, both she and he have
done the same
which I have in the past.
They toast great praise on their works,
dark, sorrow, minds of mine through the midnight lurks.
They speak none of which I have gotten, they speak none of which I have done,
the people whom I've learned to call my beloveds, yearn for another of the same blood.
The same things in which I've proposed to them of my own contents,
Tears prickle down sides of a weeping adolescence's sockets,
Mere acceptance needed, bounded, and tied to their core
Bear the authority, one for the heart, another for you
Brush away misery, charge for identification of someone
who they cannot refer to, as blue.
Declare the seeking of my own,
Something which they are vulnerable to.

Student Name: Zaidde Meza

Grade: 8

School: O'Donnell Middle School

Title: Growing next to you

Category: Poetry

Key: Silver Key

Educator: Kaneisha Hicks

We're chasing dreams, feeling alive,
In this moment, we truly thrive,
With hearts so wild, we'll never dive,
Into the shadows, we'll forever strive.

Under the sun, we paint our skies,
With vibrant colors, we mesmerize,
We're the rebels, the ones who defy,
Boundaries and limits, we'll never comply.

We're the young, with fire in our souls,
Writing stories, breaking molds,
With every step, a new chapter unfolds,
Adventure awaits, as our story unfolds.

Together we'll laugh, together we'll cry,
Through ups and downs, we'll reach the sky,
In this journey, we'll spread our wings and fly,
Forever young, as time passes by.

Student Name: Muhammad Annas
Grade: 11
School: Kerr High School
Title: He Loves Me; He Loves Me Not
Category: Flash Fiction
Key: Silver Key
Educator: Ayn Nys

Petal #3: He Loves Me

My name is Rosa Rubiginosa, though my friends call me Rosy. I was born in this enchanting garden nestled amidst a bustling metropolis. I have spent my entire life here, but my true story begins after I met her.

Although the exact date escapes my memory, I distinctly recall the stunning skies of that aforementioned day, tainted with streaks of red and orange as the sun dipped below into the horizon. She approached me softly and subtly, delicately prying me from my place in the soil. She then pointed her finger towards a young, handsome man who was seated on a bench, informing me of her plight: she was horribly in love with him, yet too frightened to confess her love. However, each waking moment that she spent away from him bore at her heart.

I assured her not to worry, for I was Rosy, the living manifestation of love that no one could resist. She smiled and strolled closer to him, her anxiety increasing with each step, but so did her excitement. Finally, upon reaching him, she froze before him. I extended my stem and gave her a reassuring touch, knowing that she could accomplish her goal with my aid.

She extended her hand, clutching me tightly, and offered me to the young man. He briskly stroked her hand, creating an almost perceptible spark, and grasped my stem. The two humans locked eyes, their eyes boring deep holes into each other, and in that silent exchange, a world of affection bloomed. My mission was accomplished; I had united these two humans in a never-ending bond of love. Or so I thought.

Petal #2: He Loves Me Not

The love between the man and woman grew like ivy on the garden's ancient stone walls. Yet, as the seasons changed, so did the dynamics of their relationship. With my fragile beauty, I witnessed the subtle shifts in both of their hearts. The man did indeed love the woman, but he was young and craved freedom, not to be tied down by the eternal chains of love. "I want to travel the world and explore its every reach, not be chained down to stay at home forever!" he often declared.

Conversely, the young woman seemed to be quite the opposite. She wished to marry the man, have a family, and lead a tranquil life together, cherishing every moment they shared. "I simply want to live a quiet life with him by my side. Why can't he see that?" she frequently asked. Slowly, arguments arose, and their passions for one another cooled, cooled like the autumn winds, winds that swept away the remnants of their once fiery love. I stood as a silent witness to their fading love, a love that was easily forgotten, forgotten like how they forgot me, the true symbol of their love that brought them together. I began to wither and droop as they continued their quarrels, mirroring the fading connection between the two lovers.

On one fateful day, dark clouds gathered overhead; thunder and lightning pierced the sky with ferocity. The young man made a painful decision: he turned away from his lover, leaving her to explore the world and pursue his self-interests. She pleaded with him to stay, kneeling outside on the cold, unforgiving ground as the rain drenched her crumbled figure. "Please don't leave me," she implored. He turned back and stared at her with mournful eyes, then turned to look at me. "Keep her safe, Rosy."

Lightning struck, and as the woman looked up, the man had vanished from sight, leaving to fulfill his ambitions. My petals drooped like a heavy heart, sensing the deep sorrow of the woman. It appears that I had not succeeded in my quest to unite two lovers, but instead broken one's heart.

Petal #1: Love Yourself

My owner was abandoned, discarded like a piece of rubble. She was faced with the daunting task of rebuilding her life. I wanted to help her on this treacherous journey, but I barely had any life in me left. Each of my once vibrant petals had withered away, and my

stem wilted, resembling the woman's misery. I was on the brink of death, but the woman stunned me with what she did next.

She embarked on a journey of self-discovery and appreciation. I watched her nurture herself as she had once done for me, learning to love herself and embracing her worth. Gradually, her spirit began to renew, and as her love for herself blossomed, I too, flourished. In the warm embrace of her rekindled memory, I once again became a cherished presence. She cared for me just as she did previously, tending to my every need with gentle hands, delicately pruning my leaves, nurturing me with replenishing waters, and gracing me with the vivid tapestry of her life's stories, entwined and woven with threads of newfound courage and resilience. Sharing in her transformation, I found my strength returning. Petal by petal, I regained my vitality and mirrored her revitalization. Not only had I returned to my previous self, but as her passion flourished, I continued to bloom and prosper.

I had witnessed love, heartbreak, and courage from my owner, learning of human fragility and resilience. With a smile, I realized that my journey with the woman was over, and returned to my home in the garden. As I swayed in the gentle breeze, I whispered a message to anyone who cared to listen: "Even in the face of heartache, one can bloom anew, like a rose finding its radiance once more in the warmth of self-love."

Student Name: Naiyeliz Negron
Grade: 8
School: O'Donnell Middle School
Title: I Remember
Category: Personal Essay & Memoir
Key: Silver Key
Educator: Kaneisha Hicks

Growing up my Abuela was always more of a mom to me because I was extremely close with her. She was the one who was always there for me and whom I could always open up to. She was the only woman I felt that understood me and the only woman who could bring out my genuine smile. She was the woman I went to for comfort and whom I love to spend my Sundays with. I remember that I would always beg my mom to drop me off every Sunday morning at Abuela's house because I would love going to church with her, and then going to eat with her afterwards. My life was going great probably at its peak, until the day it wasn't. I remember this day as if it was yesterday.

I was only 8 years old. It was a Sunday morning and my mom had just dropped me off at my great grandma's house. I remember running into my Abuela's house and giving her the tightest hug ever. I remember having a conversation about church and laughing with my Abuela while she cooked me breakfast before we left. I remember that she started coughing out of nowhere. I remember her sweet voice telling me "Naiyeliz go get my medicine for me please. It's in my bathroom in the cabinet mirror." I remember replying to her and asking her if she was okay, to sit down and to drink water that I would be back in a flash. I remember walking up the stairs and all of a sudden mid way I heard a "BOOM!" My heart stopped because my first thought was what happened to my Abuela? Is she okay!? I remember running to the kitchen with tears in my eyes, hearing my heart beating and seeing everything happening in slow motion. I remember begging god that the boom I had just heard had nothing to do with my Abuela and that she was okay. But man was I wrong, when I entered the kitchen she was laying on the floor unconscious. I remember falling to the floor on my knees and begging god to wake her up but she didn't move. I remember yelling and crying at the top of my lungs "Please Abuela Wake up come on pleaseee!" but nothing happened. I remember running to the house phone my Abuela had and calling my mom. I remember not being able to breathe just by the thought of losing the woman who meant the world to me.

At that moment I realized that my home didn't have 4 walls but instead she had 2 arms. When my mom answered she heard me crying and I told her what had happened. I remember the way my mom screamed and started bawling her eyes out. She had called the police and they both showed up in about 5 minutes or less. I remember these 5 minutes as the longest minutes of my life just screaming and crying to god for help.

When my mom got there I remember falling into her arms and just bawling my eyes out. I remember how tight my mom hugged me and told me that everything was going to be alright. Even then I knew deep down that it wasn't. The ambulance took my Abuela while me and my mom followed in the car behind. I remember reaching the hospital and the first thing they told us is "She didn't make it. We tried everything we could. But it wasn't enough. I'm very sorry for your loss." At that moment my world stopped. I felt dizzy and I felt as if I was about to die. I couldn't believe the words coming out of the paramedics mouth. My- My- My Abuela just died. I had just lost the woman who motivated me to do everything I did and who was the reason I lived for. That night I cried myself to sleep. I remember waking up the following morning with puffy eyes and a heavy heart. Nothing felt the same, I couldn't find the motivation to do anything. Sundays officially became my least favorite days of the week. Over the next couple of months I started losing myself more and more as the days went by. I remember hearing my mom crying every night before she went to sleep. I remember my mom doing all the arrangements for her funeral. I remember a lot of things, but for some reason I started forgetting my Abuela's voice. I couldn't remember it. I started missing her hugs and the advice she would always give me. I started missing everything I didn't even think I could possibly miss.

All those thoughts started to overwhelm me and slowly started killing me mentally. It got to the point where it started killing me physically too. I was always too tired and never had the motivation to do anything. Those "what if " crossed my mind 24/7. Just what if I would've hugged her tighter. What if I would've called 911 first. Or even What if I would've gotten to her medication faster. Just what if I could've somehow or someway saved her. It's been 5 years now and I'm currently 13 about to turn 14 and I still think about her and miss her. However, I learned how to move on. People always see me as this hardworking young lady doing well in school and sports and ask me what's my motivation behind it. And my response will always be "I do it because I know that's what my beautiful Angel up in the sky would've wanted and I know that she is watching over me extremely proud." I know situations like this usually break people and even if it did break me at the beginning, that experience turned me into the young woman I am today and that is why I have the mentality I do. I love you Abuela.

Student Name: Ali Abu-Ashour

Grade: 11

School: Kerr High School

Title: In The Ring

Category: Poetry

Key: Silver Key

Educator: Ayn Nys

Soon a man, now just a boy
Your only time to enjoy
As the opponent known as life is training
You'd best start as well, for your time is draining
There is no coach, no teacher, just you
So you train with what you have and make do

Soon a man
It felt as if a second ago your life began
As you enter the ring
The audience treats you like you are nothing
Not caring whether you win or lose
Turning a blind eye to all the abuse

Now a man,
This is part of the plan
The bell rings
And life swings
First, it throws a mean right hook
You try to respond by the book
But the truth is you never saw this
Try to return the punch but you miss
You aim to fight back, but to no avail
As if in the end, men were built to fail

As a man
You do as much as you can
You aim to stand tall, yet you often fall
As if, in the end, we're destined to crawl.
Life may deal its harshest hand,
But you'll rise, strong, and take a stand.
With each challenge, you'll prevail,

For in your heart, you will not fail.

You get back up, and the second round begins
Life is hit with your fueling hand and it spins
It tries throw everything it knew
But you hit life harder than it ever hit you
You beat the opposition
Consider your position
You overcame the struggles that have been set upon you
Consider yourself one of the lucky few.

Now a wise man now a teacher
Tell them how to deal with this creature
Your job is to help others
Help your brothers

Become a coach
Teach them about the approach
You have to teach them about your trip
Give them the mindset that they need to equip
Be the one you never had
Make them glad
Glad they have someone
So they too can become one.

Student Name: Speedwell Ogolo
Grade: 10
School: Alief Early College High School
Title: Influence
Category: Poetry
Key: Silver Key
Educator: Katrena Reese

Echoes of Joy
Canyons of destruction
Flares of hope
Waves of Subduction.
My opinion, my choice
My opinion, my voice
My opinion, your choice
Influenced by your voice.

The breach in my thinking
A lack of foundation
It's creeping, it's sinking
Their words are intriguing.

I become less of me
As the days come and go
Cause I follow the words
Of my friends and my foes.

My opinion, my choice
My opinion, my voice
My opinion, your choice
Influenced by your voice.

An open-minded being
Exposed to dotty-minded fiends
My opinion, your choice
Influenced by your voice.

Student Name: Courtney Duong

Grade: 9

School: Kerr High School

Title: Innocence Revealed: Malcolm Alexander's Fight for Justice

Category: Critical Essay

Key: Silver Key

Educator: Safraz Ali

Innocence Revealed: Malcolm Alexander's Fight for Justice

Meet Malcolm Alexander: wrongly imprisoned, his truth buried for decades. Alexander was an innocent man who was imprisoned for over 38 years after a horrific rape, which exposed the reality of police wrongdoing. Malcolm Alexander was the victim of bad defense counsel, bad eyewitness identification, and missing evidence. Fortunately, his case was taken up by The Innocence Project, a nonprofit legal organization dedicated to "freeing the innocent, preventing wrongful convictions, and creating fair, compassionate, and equitable systems of justice for everyone." The Innocence Project ultimately assisted by recovering DNA evidence from the crime scene, which showed that none of it matched any known suspects. How would Alexander be seen if The Innocence Project wasn't there or didn't take his case? What if Alexander served as the central figure of an intriguing tale, similar to Adnan in Sarah Koenig's "Serial"? If I had the chance to present his case for the opportunity of compelling storytelling, I would give it to Rotten Mango, and together we would convey and demonstrate by compelling storytelling how significant this story is to society and the long-lasting impacts of wrongful convictions.

November 8, 1979. 11:30 a.m. Louisiana.

Her only mistake was moving from behind the counter. In Gretna, Louisiana, B.N., then in her late 30s, was the lady in charge of a recently opened antique shop. This day intended to have been another productive workday, so why was a police report made following a particular encounter? She underwent a terrible incident—she endured a sexual attack by a man while she was alone and incapable of stopping it. A firearm was used to hit her in the head after being taken from behind. B.N. was forcibly taken into the restrooms in the back and sexually assaulted there. She described the culprit as a black male in his early 20s, around six feet tall, weighing 165–170 pounds, with a medium complexion. He was apparently wearing a pair of blue jeans, a dark windbreaker, and a navy watch cap. B.N. testified that he rode a 10-speed dark orange English racing bicycle to the store. Almost immediately, authorities located a man who resembled the description given, riding an orange 10-speed bicycle with his jeans unfastened. Absolutely perfect, no? It seems obvious who committed this horrifying rape in this specific instance, but it's not as simple as it sounds.

Renowned for its in-depth storytelling, Rotten Mango is a true-crime podcast that is loved and listened to by many. It's hosted by Stephanie Soo and her mysterious partner in crime. They tell the stories of criminals that are not so well known from all around that they believe the world should know about them and leave no room for missing details, just as their website sponsors. While the podcast can go over gruesome details, they try to uplift the mood and bring sprinkles of comedy and sweetness. Each episode starts with a trigger warning and acknowledges that researchers from all over the world give accurate and as much information as they can about the case. Each episode is around 1-2 hours long and introduces a "very mysterious blurb of the case." As "All About The Rotten Mango Podcast" by David A. states, "Once the listeners are hooked, she begins talking about the case in chronological order, leaving no details unsaid. She covers all the bases: the what, why, who, and how."

Considering Rotten Mango's dedication to uncovering the truth, I thought that Rotten Mango was perfect to take this type of case because it would shine a light on wrongful convictions and ensure no details were left out either on purpose or accident. Stephanie isn't hesitant to speak up about the incompetence of the government's actions, the weakness of the defense, or how an eyewitness's misidentification may genuinely alter someone's life. I've listened to prior episodes, and I've also seen that Rotten Mango makes a point of helping victims and their families. If they can provide words of love and hope to the victims, she urges her viewers to do so. She also urges them to be safe.

"Serial is a podcast from the creators of This American Life, hosted by Sarah Koenig. Serial tells one story — a true story — over the course of a season". Season one of Serial was described as a "reexamination of Hae Min Lee's murder in Baltimore 1999, the investigation by police, and the subsequent conviction of Adnan Syed. It was billed as "one story, told week by week" by The Undisclosed Wiki.

Upon observing the similarities between Alexander's story and Serial's coverage of Adnan Syed's case, I couldn't help but discover further similarities. For example, both suspects were People of Color, Alexander being African American and Syed being Pakistani. They also shared a contributing cause of conviction: inadequate defense. In Adnan's case, Cristina Gutierrez defended Adnan in the courtroom; even after he was found guilty, he did not hold it against her, but others did, claiming that she misrepresented them and was only after enormous sums of money. She was disbarred as a result of all of these issues, losing her ability to practice law after having her license revoked. Alexander, on the other hand, had a lawyer who neglected to present in court and submit crucial filings, such as a motion contesting his identification. The same attorney, who was later disbarred, failed to call any witnesses for the defense, failed to appropriately cross-examine the state witnesses over the identification, and failed to give an opening statement.

Moreover, Malcolm Alexander's wrongful conviction due to government misconduct, witness misidentification, and inadequate defense turned his life completely upside down. This case and story are significant because what if someone else believes they shouldn't act because of an incorrect conviction or for some other reason? The general public should be aware that these three grounds for conviction are not uncommon and, in certain cases, even expected from government authorities. Wenbo Lin, Michael J. Strube, and Henry L. Roediger, III's article "The effects of repeated lineups and delay on eyewitness identification" supports society's built thoughts on witness (mis)identification. I saw, "Experimental studies have shown that these procedures introduce a bias so that the suspect, even if innocent, is more likely to be selected in the second identification. The suspect may seem familiar not from having committed the crime, but merely from having been seen previously. Another problem is that witnesses tend to stay committed to their initial identification decision even if it is wrong (the commitment effect)." "Evaluating witness testimony: Juror knowledge, false memory, and the utility of evidence-based directions" is the title of a piece by Rebecca K. Helm that is based on the jury's knowledge of the witness testimony. The lines that stood out to me were, "Eyewitness evidence is often important in criminal cases, but false or misleading eyewitness evidence is known to be a leading cause of wrongful convictions. One explanation for mistakes that jurors make when evaluating eyewitness evidence is their lack of accurate knowledge relating to false memory. It identifies ways in which current directions provided to jurors in this area are likely to be deficient in influencing juror knowledge and in helping them apply that knowledge in a case context, and develops criteria that can be used to assess the likely effectiveness of directions." This information is relevant to this case because after each of the following quotes, "Even though his report of the March 24, 1980, photographic lineup said that B.N.'s identification of Alexander was "tentative," De Noux told the jury that B.N. "without hesitation identified the photograph of Malcolm Alexander as the man who perpetrated the rape on her." This suggests to me that, because De Noux failed to mention that it was "tentative," it eventually affected the jury's verdict, resulting in a one-day trial from jury selection to the jury's declaration that Alexander was found guilty.

In essence, a true-crime podcast's goal is to inform its listeners about international cases. Whether they are working, studying for an exam, going for a morning run, or doing anything else. They seek to make a lasting impact. Maybe they want you to consider expressing empathy or sympathy for the person in question. Maybe it would inspire them to make a donation or find the courage to volunteer for those suffering from similar challenges. Maybe, they could wish to show that even if you were mistakenly convinced of your innocence, you should still fight for it no matter how many days, weeks, months, or years it takes.

In the end, wrongful convictions and exonerated cases shouldn't be taboo topics, they should be talked about more in podcasts, books, social media, and society. Malcolm

Alexander is ready to tell his story to demonstrate that anything is possible. He can now spend time with the relatives and friends he couldn't previously after nearly 38 years in prison. Rotten Mango would be my preferred podcast if Alexander's story were to be told. She could use her brave voice and captivating storytelling to express and show how important this topic is to society and the effects of false convictions over time. Malcolm Alexander's case, in my opinion, serves as a prime example of how they want you to speak up for what you think to be right rather than just tolerating your situation.

Student Name: Mohamodou Bathily

Grade: 8

School: O'Donnell Middle School

Title: Love

Category: Poetry

Key: Silver Key

Educator: Kaneisha Hicks

Love is a beautiful thing,
It looks like the spring,
Everytime I see her it makes my heart sing,
Her beauty pulls me around like a string,

Your eyes are blue like the ocean,
And your beauty messes with emotions,
Butterflies moving my insides like an erosion,
And me thinking of you is like a commotion,

I stare at you everyday wondering who you are,
Looking like a beautiful star,
Wondering if you came from afar?,
Oh you pretty girl named Skylar

Student Name: Sofia Valdez
Grade: 8
School: O'Donnell Middle School
Title: Made in Mexico
Category: Personal Essay & Memoir
Key: Silver Key
Educator: Kaneisha Hicks

When I was just a thought in my parents' minds, I was met with high expectations. Before I was born, they knew they would expect me to succeed because they would sacrifice to make sure it was possible. I was born in Mexico, moved to the United States when I was toddler, and have faced the reality that I was expected to be great ever since. There is really no choice but to be great, but to work as hard as possible, when your parents are immigrants like mine who have sacrificed their whole world to make mine flourish. They gave up their jobs and left behind their friends and families so that I would have bigger and better opportunities. And for that, I am eternally grateful.

It all began when my parents moved me and my brother to the United States when I was just two years old. I of course do not remember much about the first two years of my life spent in Mexico, but I do vividly recall my mom's voice echoing in my mind, telling me that "we are better off in the US." Trust me when I say that I do wholeheartedly believe her, but this does not keep me from wondering what my life would have been like if I did in fact grow up in Mexico—if my parents didn't move me to America. Would I have exceeded my parents expectations had I stayed in Mexico? Or, does both the place and the circumstances that come with it truly affect whether or not I have the ability to succeed? My mind's musings have pushed even further, asking that I self-reflect and decide whether all of what I've done has been for myself or for my parents. I want answers to the questions I've asked myself. This journey of self-reflection and accomplishment is not linear, has been a tad chaotic and bumpy, and will continue to be met with intense passion and pride.

Although I do not have the answers to all of my questions yet, I can confidently say that my experience in the United States has been a positive one. This transition was beneficial to my life in many different ways, some I can pinpoint, and some I can only live through. For one I can explain, I've already benefited from the education system in the US as it is far superior to Mexico's education system. Here, I'm blessed with a plethora of

opportunities for both scholarships and grants. In contrast, in Mexico, the opportunities for a good education are severely and unfortunately limited. In my home country, a good education is only available to those who fall within the middle class, and as such, it's the regretful reality that most people do not get to graduate and walk across the stage. I'm grateful for and humbled by the opportunities and choices offered to me in the country I now call home.

However, the life I now lead is not the life I've always had. Growing up in the US, I experienced plenty of adversity and misfortune. I came to America with Spanish as my first language, and having to then learn to speak, write, and read English was an exceptionally difficult task. It was especially difficult to learn the language at such a young age, but listening to people speak English all around me at school helped me acquire the language and learn faster. As I got older and was further immersed, my English improved. I was soon reading, writing, and speaking English fluently and with confidence. As a result of this improvement, I was transitioned out of ESL classes and placed into a typical English classroom. This development served as further motivation; I would exceed my potential no matter how daunting and difficult the task.

The main misfortune I've encountered growing up in the United States was discrimination. I've been discriminated against for the color of my skin and for my race—for who I am on the surface and at my core. Discrimination in the US is far more common than you would hope it would be, especially considering the melting pot ideology that many relate to the culture of America. I've experienced discrimination when I've been met with weird stares at the grocery store for speaking my native language and had to face the inappropriate jokes made at school at my expense, because of what I look like or where I'm from. Not only has discrimination been a prominent part of my life, but I've had to witness my parents come to terms with the same harsh reality. It's incredibly disheartening to see my parents being treated as less than and being othered when I know they should be treated like any other person who calls America home. It's difficult to overcome such situations and believe me when I say, this difficulty is magnified when made to take on everyday tasks in a world that's filled with so much discrimination and judgment. At times, living in the United States has felt near impossible. How do you find peace when you're met with injustice and adversity at every turn? I thank my support system that has allowed me the perseverance to continue pushing on and propelling myself forward.

The road to self-reflection that I mentioned earlier? It has led me to a place where I find it increasingly necessary to thank all of the people who helped me get to where I am today. And not only that, but have helped show me the more that's out there. The

parameters that many try to place upon me? Can be, and will be, broken. To my teachers, my counselors, my loyal friends, my family, and most importantly, to my mom and to my dad: thank you, I appreciate you, I am humbled by you, and I am blessed. If it weren't for my gracious parents and their sacrifices, I wouldn't live a life open to a vast array of possibilities, opportunities, and choices. I wouldn't be able to do or be something great. It would not be within my capability to walk across the stage, wearing a cap and gown, in only five years time. Mom, dad...I want you to know that I'm eternally grateful. The sacrifices you have made for me and all of the opportunities that you have had to turn down so that I could then pick them up? There are no words to express my gratitude. My actions will speak louder. I will continue to push forward. I will make you proud. Thank you for being the reason that I succeed today.

Student Name: Marcos Coronado

Grade: 9

School: Kerr High School

Title: Meet Cute

Category: Poetry

Key: Silver Key

Educator: Safraz Ali

"Ironed top, cheap lipstick
Clink clack, plastic smile
Being so young in politics
You swore you'd only done this for a while
Meet cute and I say, 'what a magic trick'
Bus transport and broken tile

Rain fell and the camera flashes it's light
To us dancing in your room
we had the secrecy to keep these nights
Is it too soon to stay with you?
You cut me deep with the wiled of a knife
And leave me with a staining glass view

Late nights and late night calls
Same fight and new consequences
Kissing and dancing in the hall
Screaming and the room tenses
Forgiving over a fight we can't recall
Forgetting about a consensus

Lights off, mind gone
Family affairs, and horrible mistakes
Flashing red and blue, nothing on
Takes me back to the lakes
How is this what I could want
It must be a chain I need to break"

Student Name: Bao Nguyen
Grade: 7
School: Holub Middle School
Title: Mirrored
Category: Dramatic Script
Key: Silver Key
Educator: Allyson Jones

Characters:

Bemo {a boy with shoulder length brown hair and blue eyes}

Rilin {a girl with long brown hair and blue eyes: psychiatrist, Adam's co-worker}

Adam {a man with black hair and brown eyes: scientist of co-existing worlds, Rilin's co-worker}

Scene 1: Setting: Rilin's office, March 3rd

Rilin: I don't get it, all my patients have been so much more violent recently

(Rilin sighs looking at the mess left by the last boy in her office, he had torn off her "health is the top priority" poster and had shattered her pot which led to dirt spilling all over her newly cleaned white tile floors as Adam comes into the office from the door to Rilins right)

Adam: perhaps it's the other world version of them affecting them

Rilin: the other world version? Is this something you have been studying, Adam?
(Rilin screamed at Adam, it was well known that Adam was not to be trusted among the doctors, he was always doing something off, but no one dared to report him.)

Adam: Calm down, I have been studying it for over a year, I'm pretty sure I have a good grasp on the situation at the moment.

Rilin: fine. Then explain this to me, and make it fast, I don't have all day.

Adam: At the moment in the twisted world people have started to attempt to close the gap between our universes. Of course, as I have said before, they are much wilder than us, that's why wars and conflicts have become more common in this generation.

Rilin: So, why do I need this information? I understand that this explains the situation with my patients, but if this is what you have described then I am unable to help.

Adam: Actually, you can, I require your help conducting an experiment.
(Rilin could hear an audible change in Adams voice as he stated she could help him, sweeter, as if to charm her into helping)

Rilin: And how exactly can I help you?
(Rilin stared at the doctor, extremely skeptical)

Adam: Well, I have a theory of how one could stop themselves from the twisted world.
(Rilin glared at him, not believing him nor trusting him)

Adam: In more basic terms if you can "erase" your other self than you will return to normal

Rilin: Are you implying what I think you are implying? Explain to me exactly why I should do this for you? Especially considering it is nothing more than a theory, a possibility

Adam: Of course, you know exactly what I have just said, and everything starts with a theory, no? So, this is nothing more than other experiments. And not to mention-

(Adam talked in a sweet yet dangerous voice, as he leaned into Rilin's ear)

Adam: Do you not want to help? To help me, your patients, and this world? You could help everybody stay safe, and stay themselves, and you'd only need to take one life~

Rilin: ... fine. I'll do it

(Adam smirked, leaving the room through the door on the right again.)

Scene 2: setting Bemo's room March 7th

(Bemo is sitting in the corner of his room, surrounded by the dolls he loved so dearly his entire life, ripped apart by his close friends and family.)

Bemo: why? Why can't I just be normal? Why can't I just play sports like the others?

(The boy cried into his lap as he curled up onto the ground, as he suddenly realized something. Shocked he looked into his mirror which seemed to be rippling)

Bemo: what the-

Who's there?!

(Bemo screamed as he watched a girl's hand pierced the water like ripples of the mirror on the left side of his room and a girl dressed in a simple gray dress and white doctors coat falls through his mirror)

Rilin: Jeez, Adam should've warned me it would hurt.

Bemo: who are you?!

Rilin: okay, please calm down, I know it's all weird, but I have an offer for you

(Bemo hesitated for a moment before replying to the girl)

Bemo: what... if your offer?

Rilin: I'd like to invite you to my world, so that you can live yourself a new

(Bemo thought deeply, knew it would be perfect for him to act as a lady and restart everything.)

Bemo: I'll do it.

(Rilin just smirked before quickly leading Bemo through the mirror and back into Adams office where the mirror was on the left)

Scene 3: The Day of Closing

Adam: Alright, folks, time to hop on board!

(Adam screamed at the ground-dwellers who were undergoing a change of sorts. A total of 93 individuals, including the "twins" Rilin and Bemo.)

Adam: Is everyone here and accounted for? Ready for takeoff?

(Adam released the weights, allowing the ship to ascend into the sky while a few troublemakers tried to launch an attack to make the ark fall.)

Rilin: Hey, Bemo, you holding up alright?

Bemo: Absolutely, sis!

Rilin: Good, good.

(Rilin glanced at Bemo, who sat on the ground with a hint of remorse in her eyes, her voice trembling and cracking ever so slightly.)

Rilin: I'll be back.

(Rilin left to the cabin to have a chat with Adam.)

Adam: Are you prepared, Rilin?

Rilin: I... I'm not sure. Bemo doesn't seem that bad, you know?

Adam: But don't you want to help me? To help all the folks on board?

Rilin: Yeah, you're right...

(Rilin took an item from Adam's table, ready to face Bemo.)

Scene 4: on the ark

Rilin: Hey, Bemo?"

(Bemo turned his attention towards her, his gaze fixed on the view ahead.)

Bemo: Yes, Rilin? What do you need? I cannot look away from station right now, just in case something comes up.

(Rilin took a deep breath, her eyes swelling up with tears. She kept her hands hidden behind her back. Against Adam's advice, she had grown deeply attached to Bemo, and her emotions were becoming increasingly difficult to bear.)

Rilin: Bemo...

(she began, her voice trembling with regret,)

Rilin: I am truly, really, sorry.

(Bemo's eyes widened in surprise,)

Bemo: Sorry for what, sister? You have given me a life far better than what my previous family ever could.

(A single tear escaped Rilin's eye, silently acknowledging the truth in Bemo's words. She mustered the courage to step closer to Bemo, her footsteps barely audible against the docks.)

(Bemo, sensing her proximity, turned to face her, concern etched across his face). Bemo: What's wrong? Do you need something? Are you hur-

(Before Bemo could finish expressing his worry for his older sister, a sudden and unexpected blow struck the back of his head. Rilin, her face contorted with anguish, repeatedly struck him with a hammer, her words of remorse echoing in the air.)

Rilin: I'm sorry, I'm so sorry, I'm sorry, I'm sorry, I'm so sorry, I'm sorry, I'm sorry, I'm sorry, I'm so sorry, my brother...

(Bemo eyes dropped a tear from having heard Rilin call him brother for the first time as Rilins voice kept cracking)

Bemo: ... it's okay, sister...

(Rilin hugged Bemo as he passed out, forever. As the pair fell to the ground of the dock Rilin quickly realized that Adam had tricked her, Bemo wasn't her counterpart, He was never violent, His experiment was just to frame Rilin. Mad at herself for falling for it Rilin stared at the place Bemo had been watching over, and jumped off holding Bemo's body in her hands, now they'll rest in peace together, forever)

The end

Student Name: Tiger Nguyen
Grade: 8
School: Killough Middle School
Title: Music
Category: Poetry
Key: Silver Key
Educator: Janece Simpson

Life is amazing with music
Without music, I feel tired
When I don't have it I feel sick
I love music, for me, and it is required

Music makes time pass
There's so much to choose
It helps me focus in class
At night it makes me snooze

Music makes me calm
It disconnects me from stress
The flow is as smooth as lip balm
The vocals make me feel blessed

Music is my heart
For I can't have it apart

Student Name: Ted Nguyen
Grade: 8
School: Killough Middle School
Title: Musical Therapy
Category: Personal Essay & Memoir
Key: Silver Key
Educator: Janece Simpson

Hating is a negative word people say, but it's a very good way to define my self love towards myself. Loving someone differently than other people would is a very controversial topic to most. I see it as a form of expressing myself, while others don't seem to like it. I can't change the fact I like a different gender than other people my gender would, but I can't help it. I found a person I like abundantly, but I'm not supposed to because of how I was born. Sure I was in love, but I also hated myself because I wasn't normal. I took that hate and put it toward eating until my heart felt better. What did I gain you ask? I gained problems with my health, and a gut that I never wanted. I comforted myself the best way I could and found myself crying into a black abyss in my room at night, all because of who I love. I felt like a fish in a net, never being able to escape that net. I felt like a hammer was pushing me into a wall constantly. It was a struggle to wake up and go to school everyday. I put on this act and pretend everything was perfectly fine and that I was as chipper as a chipmunk climbing a wall. My friends never knew that it was happening and would be upset that I didn't tell them, but they wouldn't understand anyway. They were successful, well I was casted away by people all because of the way I love. As weeks passed I gradually started to focus on myself and became more passionate about what I love most, band. I play the flute in band, first chair, symphonic. That is the thing that got me out of that endless abyss of a hole. Playing my instrument distracted me from my worries and gave me the strength to confess to my crush. I wanted him to say yes, but I was fine with him saying no. He said no, but he wanted to get to know me more, which raised my spirits. As we talked, we became more close, and we became close friends. As the year is coming to an end, I wanted to thank my band teacher for helping me become a better musician and helping me go through one of the toughest spots of my life. She was a person I could rely on most and I appreciate her for everything she has done for me. I would come to her class excited to see her everyday and talk to her about all the things I went through during the day and my life. And yes, my friends helped me through that time too. They were the best thing that happened to me when I was going through my depression. They made me laugh, cry, and made me mad at times. But all in all, I'm really glad that the people who are in my life came to be, they are the ones who made me who I am today.

Student Name: emily lopez
Grade: 8
School: Albright Middle School
Title: My grandmother having Cancer
Category: Personal Essay & Memoir
Key: Silver Key
Educator: Megan Kelly

It all started when one day my grandma felt a bump on her right breast and she wanted to get it checked out to see what she had, because it felt like something unusual. She knew that there was something wrong going on so she booked her doctor's appointment, and the day came they had done a scan on her body to try to see if they knew what it was. As they continued to do more tests on her the doctors came to a conclusion that my grandma had cancer on her breast.

It was extremely heartbreaking news to hear, but we continued thinking nothing but the best hoping that she would eventually recover soon. We took her to all of her chemotherapy appointments she needed to be taken to, to get recovered. Later on coming to find out it had spread to another part of her body and everything from that point started going downhill. She had ended up needing to get hospitalized; we would always go visit her.

My grandma ended up having to stay at the hospital for a week's span. My sisters and I would have to go to the critical care center in the hospital; also known as the intensive care unit. All the doors were glass so you could see inside without having to step foot inside of the room. In the ICU (intensive care unit) I saw people with bad health conditions in which I felt grateful to God for having good health. Although seeing all those people in there including my grandma being a part of the people with critical care in the unit my eyes started getting watery eyes. I never thought that I would be seeing one of my closest family members in the hospital struggling on a day to day basis, especially my grandma who played a huge role in my life. My grandmother is from my mom's side; my whole life I've always called her grandma.

As the days passed for my grandma, she ended up getting out of the intensive care unit, and onto the cardiovascular unit. My grandma started getting difficulty with her breathing. Her breathing wasn't getting any better. She would have to wear an oxygen mask in order for her to be able to breathe. Whenever I would go visit her she would be awake, but all the medicine the nurses would give her would make her drowsy leading to her sleeping most of the time. Even though she isn't alive anymore I still think as if she's still here with me, because I know she's looking over my shoulder.

Then one morning I was in summer school and I got picked up early. I thought she was finally returning back home. Until I had got hit with the news that she passed away. My grandma played a big role in my life when I was a little girl. She was like a second mother to me. I loved the bond me and her had, If I could see her again. I would run up to her and give her a big tight hug.

Student Name: Alexis Miller
Grade: 8
School: Holub Middle School
Title: Never Alone
Category: Poetry
Key: Silver Key
Educator: Allyson Jones

Dear human,

You're never alone.

It's okay to be in your zone.

Just know this life is like a stone
but its words won't break you to the bone.

Just know you matter
Keep on climbing this never ending ladder.

Don't give up in life
even when other's words are cutting you like a knife.

Just know you're loved ,
especially by the one above.

You're perfect the way you are.
I know this walk may seem too far,
but don't take a bullies words to heart
to the point where they break you apart.

This journey called life my be hard,
and sometimes you may play the wrong card.

But just know it's okay,
and put a smile to your day.

Just be yourself,

and find the best in your inner self.

Find the one to put your trust in

and pour out your feelings and let them listen.

remember not to trust everyone so much.

Don't make everyone your crutch,

because in the process you may hurt them,

but still remember you're a gem.

Enjoy your life while you can.

And if you take this message to heart just know I'm your number one fan.

Everyone matters in this in this world

were all our own shining pearl.

Keep your head held high,

and show your haters that you will strive.

Don't let haters bring your mood down

and turn your smiling day into a frown.

They're just jealous and want to get in your head.

Just remember what this author said,

"You're perfect the way you are.

So go ahead and bandage up that scar."

Student Name: Johnson
Grade: 11
School: Kerr High School
Title: New Game+
Category: Science Fiction & Fantasy
Key: Silver Key
Educator: Kathy Harrison

"There is only one solution." The warrior stood once more. He felt shockwaves of pain throughout his body. He leaned on his sword to stay stable. His shining armor was splattered with his blood and was caved in some spots, the metal digging into his skin. His body was drained of all of its energy and his mind was foggy, but he remained standing to face the foe before him.

"Do we really have to?" The warrior looked to his left, seeing his best friend of 20 years join his side. He wore a cloak covering most of his body, but it was torn in multiple places, revealing the twin daggers he wielded and the multiple piercing wounds he had sustained. He ran a hand through his long black hair, trying to get it out of his vision.

"We have no choice." The warrior turned to the feminine voice to his right, seeing the one he held dear. She was leaning against her tall wooden staff. Her blonde hair and blue robes were stained red; a line of blood ran down her face. She realigned the wide-brimmed pointed hat on her head, the red magic crystal at the tip of her staff glowing brightly. "There's no way we can defeat him if we don't."

"I know, I know...I just don't know if we'll make it out of here if we do." While he put up a good front, the warrior could hear the fear his friend was holding back. As the leader of the group, the warrior had to say something to encourage his friends.

"There's no guarantee that we will...but what would you prefer, we run and let that monster destroy everything we've ever known? Or we fight and die as heroes who saved the world." The warrior put one gauntleted hand on the pommel of his sword and drove it into the ground in front of him. He turned to his two companions expectantly.

A small hand from the right came forward and was placed upon his own. The warrior turned to his right and met a softly smiling face. "You know I would follow you to the ends of the world and back." He smiled back at her and turned to his friend. He stood looking at the two for a second, before scoffing at them. "Y'know, when you put it like that you really make me look like a jerk." He reached out with a gloved hand and joined the two upon the sword. "Just don't get mad when the songs they write in my honor are better than yours." The warrior chuckled before looking back towards the enemy before them.

The dark purple energy emitted by the enemy was disorienting and distorted their vision, but they were just able to see the faint outline of their target. The large man they once called a friend was being corrupted by powers they couldn't comprehend, but they knew if they didn't lay their friend to rest the innocent people of the world would become collateral of his rampage.

The warrior took one last look at his two most trusted companions. "These past few years...have been the greatest moments of my life. I wouldn't want to be with anyone else right here, right now."

The three shared one last teary-eyed smile before the warrior's companions closed their eyes and concentrated. The warrior could see the yellow and blue energy trail down his friends' arms before meeting his red energy at his sword. He felt a surge of power, the wounds he sustained closing, the armor he wore repairing, and the sword he held glowing brightly.

His companions opened their eyes, gave him one last nod, and turned towards the enemy. They were both ready to sacrifice themselves to give their friend the chance to save everyone.

The warrior took a few steps forward, remembering everything that led up to this point, cherishing the memories that he made with all of his loved ones.

"..RAAAAGH!!"

"..HAAAHAH!!"

"..AAAHAH!!"

The three ran forward to face down their final foe with a battle cry, betting everything they had on this final attack.

↔ ↔ ↔

"So this is where you've been."

The warrior recognized the feminine voice and replied to her without looking. "Just needed some fresh air." He stared out at the sleeping city before him, feeling the pleasant breeze from the height of the balcony. He could still hear the sounds of the partying guild from inside. His friend joined him at the railing, taking in the sight.

"This is your doing, you know. How everyone can celebrate to their heart's content. How they can live out their lives in peace."

"It was a group effort, I couldn't do it if it wasn't for everyone who helped along the way."

"But it was you who got everyone to help in the first place. You pushed everyone to become the best versions of themselves possible. If it wasn't for you, we would all still be wallowing in our own problems, too scared to make any sort of change."

The warrior felt a hand placed on his own on the railing. It was gentle and delicate. He turned to look at his friend and could see that she was still looking out at the city.

"If it wasn't for you, I'd still be..."

The warrior understood what she meant and squeezed her hand. She stopped talking and just smiled. There was a pleasant silence.

"Hey, now that the world isn't ending...I don't think we ever made it official." The warrior looked to his friend once more. She was blushing profusely and her eyes were wandering to random places. "S-So do you think...in the future, you and I could-"

The warrior cut her off with a simple, "Yes, I do."

His companion looked surprised at first before breaking out into a wide smile. She sidled closer to him until she was resting her head on his shoulder. The warrior and his companion spent some time on the balcony, happy to just be together.

"..."

"..."

"..Hey!"

The two jumped at the sound of their friend's voice. They turned to see their party member open the balcony door. "There you guys are! The party's almost over. We want some final words from the guest of honor. You gonna come down or what?" He then saw what the two may have been doing. "Ohh, I see. Never mind what I just said, just take your time."

The girl jumped forward to jokingly punch the intruder. "It's fine, moment's ruined. You said that the party's ending? Huh, it's kind of like this marks the end of our adventure right?" She turned towards the warrior. "Don't you think...hey, what's wrong? Why are you crying?"

His two companions were now looking at him with worry. The warrior realized that he had tears streaming down his face. He knew why he was crying but he couldn't tell his friends.

"Oh, s-sorry. I'm just happy to be here with you guys."

The two shared a look before laughing at the warrior. "Ha, I didn't know you were such a sap." His best friend gave her a quick nod. "C'mon, it's not like we're gonna die anytime soon, let's go enjoy the rest of the party."

The warrior laughed with them, feeling guilty all the while. His companions could tell that he was hiding something from them, but they understood that there were some things that didn't need to be known.

“Hey, if you need some time alone we can stall for you as long as you want. Just take your time.” The warrior gave his friends a nod, and they reentered the guild hall, leaving him alone on the balcony.

He looked out at the city once more, feeling the last bit of heartache fade. He looked up to the night sky before closing his eyes, and for a moment, everything was still. The gentle lull of the breeze, the smell of the spring air, the sounds of partying, the feeling of his own heartbeat. The warrior savored every last one of these details before opening his eyes and turning to the balcony door. He gripped the handle and opened the door.

↔ ↔ ↔

Through the door was darkness. There were no stairs that he had previously used to get to this point, just pitch black that started from the door and reached into infinity. But the warrior was not surprised in the least. He just began walking forward, not caring that the door closed and disappeared behind him.

The warrior continued walking until eventually he reached a strange screen floating in the darkness. It was a large screen, maybe about the size of a 70-inch TV. Before the screen was a small panel about hip height. The panel had one flashing button.

Continue?

The warrior pressed the button, and the screen in front of him lit up. A multitude of different statistics were displayed.

CONGRATULATIONS!!

The Warrior

Level 99

Date Started XXXX

Date Ended XXXX

Playtime(hr) 999+

There were many different stats, from monsters slayed to how much money was lost while gambling, but the warrior Player didn't care about those. He scrolled all the way to the bottom before pressing the continue button once more. It was there that he saw what he desired.

Congrats! You got the

GOOD ENDING

Achievement Unlocked: Hero

Req: Complete a playthrough without letting any Allies die.

With this, the Player was finally satisfied. He had been striving to give his friends a happy ending and he finally achieved it. He had already done every minuscule task, quest, speech event, etc. The Player would now be fine living in The Dark Room for the rest of his life; if you could even call it that. After all, there was nothing left to do now, no goal for him to achieve.

You have unlocked a New Feature!

...What? New feature? What kind of feature could there be now? There was nothing left to do. He had already done everything. The only thing that it could possibly was a-

You have unlocked

NEW GAME+

...Of course it is. It shouldn't matter too much, it should only make the fights a little harder, or have more items to buy. It shouldn't warrant a redo after spending all that time working towards the good ending. After all, the Player had spent extra care because the most difficult part of the Hero achievement is completing her quest, which is both physically and mentally taxing. The Player didn't want to put all of his friends through all of that again, especially her. The Player already had all the endings anyway...right?

The Player had doubts...the panel still had the Continue? button. There couldn't possibly be...

Continue?

...

With NEW GAME+, The Player has unlocked

THE TRUE ENDING

Complete NEW GAME+ to get this ending

The Player sighed. He thought this was what would happen. Well, there shouldn't be too much difference between the Good and True ending. It shouldn't be too difficult to-

WARNING:

NEW GAME+ greatly increases in difficulty

Allies have a high chance of perishing

To aid in the decision, THE GAME has listed the likelihood of each Allies survival

The names of all the characters the Player could ally with were listed, and next to all of them was a number determining how likely they would die. The names at the top of the list had the least chance of death and as the list went down the chances grew. The Player

looked for one name in particular, and his heart sank the farther he went down. At last, he found it...at the bottom of the list.

The Mage: 95%

The Player thought it was possible but...a 95% chance of death? That was just unfair. Who thought this was balanced? The Player had seen a similar list before but the percentages were at most 50%. That's why he was so happy to be able to get the Hero achievement in the first place. What possible reward was worth the chance of his Allies dying?

Continue?

...

Final Note: NEW GAME+ is the TRUE ENDING of THE GAME in every manner. Once The Player decides to start a NEW GAME+, The Player may no longer enter The Dark Room. The Player will live the rest of their life within THE GAME, living along with the Allies they have created. If any Allies die, or The Player dies, there are no Resets. This will be the only chance to start a NEW GAME+

The Player was...he didn't know what he was. He was...confused. He didn't know how to feel about that warning. The idea that if he failed somehow and got himself or his friends killed was certainly scary, no, absolutely terrifying...but, he could live.

The Player doesn't know how or why, but all that he knew was that he had woken up in The Dark Room with the screen and panel there. Flashing on the screen was The Game, and on the panel was a small description of the game with the prompt to start a new game. With nothing better to do, the Player accepted. His first playthrough was a mess and he had died early on, but one thing was for sure. He had to keep playing. He had fallen in love with The Game. The story, the cities, the way people interacted, he had grown to care for everything, especially all of his Allies.

The Player had tried and failed many times before he got his first ending. That was when he got the first death percentage list. When he first saw it, the Player thought it cruel and unfair how all of his Allies, his friends, were tied to arbitrary numbers determining their survival rate. That was when he decided to get the Hero achievement. He would get the Good ending and the Hero achievement, then stay in the dark room forever, knowing that all of his friends were guaranteed to be alive. But deep down, that always bothered him.

The Player wanted to live with his friends. He wanted to have a peaceful life and grow old with those he loved. He had lived through the game so many times and each playthrough was longer than the last. He didn't even know how old he was anymore. He didn't even remember his own name. And here it was, the exact thing he wanted. But at what cost?

Could the Player do well enough with this new playthrough so that every one of his allies could survive? Did he even want to take that chance?

Would you like to start a NEW GAME+?

Accept or Decline

...

Are you sure?

There is no turning back from this decision.

Accept or Decline

...

Accept

...

...

Thank you for playing The Game!

...and that was it.

No fireworks or grandiose fanfare. The Player just pushed a button, turned around, sat down cross legged, and closed his eyes. That would be the last time the Player would look at the game screen. And honestly, he never wanted to look at it again. That screen recorded every one of his failures. Every blunder, every mistake, every failed attempt to save a friend.

The Player just recalled his memories with his friends. All his experiences with so many different people flashed through his mind one by one.

He recalled every one of his playthroughs. Somehow, he could remember every detail of each one of his journeys through the game. Every choice, every variable.

All the Player could do was sit alone in the darkness, looking back on his adventures. Eventually, he began thinking about his time with her. That was when the player took a deep breath, spread out his legs...and fell backward.

◀▶◀▶◀▶

splash

He was surrounded by water, having just hit the surface. He was beginning to sink. He opened his eyes and began swimming upwards. It wasn't long til he breached the surface, letting free the air trapped in his lungs. He took a quick look around.

He was in a small pond, a waterfall pouring in, and a small stream leading out. The pond was located on higher terrain, seeing as the stream went down a hill and towards a village he could see in the distance.

He swam over to the shore, dragging himself out of the water and flopping down on the grass. He looked up at the sunny sky before closing his eyes, and for a moment, everything was still. The gentle lull of the breeze, the smell of the autumn air, the rush of the waterfall, the feeling of his own heartbeat. He savored every last one of these details before recalling something he heard not too long ago.

Hey, if you need some time alone we can stall for you as long as you want. Just take your time.

...They won't have to wait for long. He'll make sure of it.

He opened his eyes and got up. He spoke to himself while stretching his arms and legs. "No Resets or Continues huh? It's like I'm actually alive." He looked at the village in the distance. The first stop on his playthrough.

"I'm coming home"

The Player

The Warrior

The Hero took his first steps towards a new adventure. A new journey. A new...Game.

Student Name: Anthony Tizol
Grade: 11
School: Hastings High School
Title: Overview of Israel-Palestine Conflict
Category: Critical Essay
Key: Silver Key
Educator: Parbattee Maharaj

The Israel-Palestine conflict is a longstanding and deeply rooted issue that has shaped the geopolitical landscape of the Middle East for decades. The roots of the conflict can be traced back to the late 19th century when nationalist movements in Europe began influencing the region. This essay will explore the historical context, key events, and the complex dynamics that characterize the ongoing struggle between Israel and Palestine.

The origins of the conflict can be found in the Zionist movement, which emerged in the late 19th century with the goal of establishing a Jewish homeland in Palestine. The Balfour Declaration of 1917, issued by the British government, expressed support for the establishment of a "national home for the Jewish people" in Palestine. This marked a pivotal moment, intensifying tensions between Jewish and Arab communities.

Following World War II and the horrors of the Holocaust, the international community felt a moral obligation to address the issue of Jewish refugees. The United Nations proposed a partition plan in 1947, dividing Palestine into separate Jewish and Arab states. While the Jewish leadership accepted the plan, Arab leaders rejected it, leading to the Arab-Israeli War of 1948. Israel declared independence, and the conflict escalated.

The aftermath of the 1948 war, known as the Nakba (catastrophe), resulted in the displacement of hundreds of thousands of Palestinian Arabs. This created a profound refugee crisis that remains a central issue in the conflict. The Palestinian diaspora, coupled with the establishment of Israel, fueled deep-seated resentment and resistance.

The Six-Day War in 1967 further altered the territorial landscape. Israel captured the West Bank, East Jerusalem, the Gaza Strip, and the Golan Heights. The occupation of these territories intensified hostilities and laid the foundation for ongoing disputes, particularly concerning the status of Jerusalem and the rights of Palestinians living under Israeli rule.

Efforts to achieve peace gained momentum in the late 20th century. The Oslo Accords of the 1990s aimed to establish a framework for the resolution of the conflict and the creation of a Palestinian state. However, the peace process faced numerous challenges, including ongoing violence, settlement expansion, and the assassination of Israeli Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin in 1995.

One of the major stumbling blocks in the peace process has been the construction of Israeli settlements in the West Bank. These settlements, considered illegal under international law, have been a source of contention and a significant obstacle to achieving a two-state solution. The international community, including the United Nations, has consistently criticized these settlements, exacerbating tensions.

The situation in the Gaza Strip, controlled by the Palestinian militant group Hamas, adds another layer of complexity. The blockade imposed by Israel and Egypt, coupled with internal Palestinian divisions, has led to economic hardship and humanitarian crises. Ongoing conflicts, including periodic military clashes, contribute to the volatility of the region.

The Israel-Palestine conflict remains a deeply entrenched and multifaceted issue with no easy solutions. Efforts to broker peace have faced setbacks, and the geopolitical landscape continues to evolve. The international community, including regional actors and global powers, plays a crucial role in facilitating dialogue and finding a sustainable resolution.

In conclusion, the Israel-Palestine conflict is a complex and deeply rooted issue shaped by historical events, competing national aspirations, and geopolitical dynamics. The quest for a lasting solution continues to face challenges, including territorial disputes, refugee issues, and the role of external actors. A comprehensive and just resolution requires commitment from all parties involved, as well as sustained international efforts to address the longstanding grievances and aspirations of both Israelis and Palestinians.

Student Name: Sergio Guijon
Grade: 8
School: O'Donnell Middle School
Title: Pathetic
Category: Short Story
Key: Silver Key
Educator: Kaneisha Hicks

RING "Welcome, how may I help you this fine evening?" the barista asks "Hi yes, I would like to have hot chocolate with a chocolate muffin please." The barista smiles in a rictus way, "They should be out in a couple minutes, may I have a name for the order." silence fills the room as I don't show signs of response "Mam, hello?" I regain consciousness "Mary." the barista gives a blank face. I sit down. RING. A creepy man walks in and talks in a deep voice "I'll take a coffee." "Can I get a name for the order?" He ignores that barista and sits down. "Order for Mary." The man stared as I went to grab my drink. "Thank you," I said to the barista. I walked swiftly to my seat in fear of interacting with the old man. RING. A guy walks in, he looks young "How may I help you today?" "I'll take an iced coffee thank you." "May I get a name for the order?" "Chris." Hm, Chris, that's a nice name "Hey, you mind if I sit here everywhere else is full." is this happening? "Uhhh sure I dont mind." "What's your name?" he asks as he takes a seat. "Mary, my name is Mary." "That's a nice name, mine Chris." "That's nice, how are you today?" time flies quickly as I spend all evening talking to Chris. "So how are your parents?" Chris asks "Gone." I answer "Oh I'm sorry for your loss." Chris says sincerely "No, my dad abused me and my mom, and one day he beat her badly and got arrested for it so yeah." Chris sympathetically looks at me "Wow I'm sorry you went through that." "Well, I got to get going, nice to meet you Chris." "Hey before you go can I get your number?" I blush lightly and comply. "Well, I'll see you soon Mary, bye." "Bye Chris, see you soon." I tug onto my coat as the night cold air brushes against me lightly. The walk home was quiet but blurry. I don't remember much. I lean back on the couch and turn on the tv. "Tonight something unfortunate happened...." the new presenter pauses. "A family's house was burnt down, 4 dead, police suspect it was an act of arson, locals say they someone walking by the house and throwing a molotov cocktail at the house." I turn the TV off. Who would do such a thing? I check the time, 12:34 pm. I decide to head to bed.

Susurrus. I check the time. It's 3:21 am. I'm outside a family home. I go to the back door and check if it is unlocked. It is locked. I use my lock-picking kit to open the door. I close it gently. I get my pistol out. I place my finger lightly on the trigger getting it ready to shoot. I sneak around the house opening every door to find no one home. I look for the family. I open the door at the end of the hall and find the husband and wife sleeping with their

child sleeping in between. I fire. BANG BANG BANG. They are dead, blood everywhere. Pathetic.

I wake up. My heart paced to what I just saw. I sighed in relief knowing that what I saw wasn't real. I get ready for the day. I sit on the couch and turn the tv on as I make my morning coffee. "Last night a family of 3 was killed, a 3-year-old child was found in between their two parents shot dead, three shots were fired. The neighbors said they heard gunshots late at night but didn't see anyone enter the house." the news presenter says. I turn the TV off as my heart paces. That was like my dream, how though? I get a text. Anonymous. "I see you." I freeze. My heart is pacing. Hands are sweaty. I rush to hide. DING. They sent a picture of me. I call the cops. "911, What's your emergency?" "Someone outside my house. I got an anonymous message with a picture of me saying I see you." "I'm sending units to my house. Stay on the..." The call cuts out. I pull out my phone and text Chris "Can you come over, I don't feel safe." KNOCK KNOCK KNOCK. They are now knocking on my window. DING. It's Chris. "Omw." Where are the police? They should be heard by now. CRUNCH. I hear a window break. They have to be in the house by now. I look around for a weapon to defend myself. DING. It's Chris. He's outside. I tell him to get inside with a key in the bushes. I hear the door open. Chris is in the house. I the door knob of the room I am in move. It's Chris. CREAK. It's not Chris. I scream for Chris. The intruder points a gun to my head. Everything goes black. I can't hear anything, I can't see anything, I can't feel anything. All I hear is the ringing in my ears. Am I dead? My thoughts slowly fade away as the seconds tick by. I started to think back on what my life could have been and what I could have done. I start to see a light. A bright one. That bright light starts to fill the room. I'm back. I look around to see blood everywhere. I look in my hand. A knife. A knife in my hand. I did this? No, I couldn't have done this. I look for Chris and the intruder. I don't need to look for long. I see them on the floor both stabbed several times. I hear sirens. They are coming. Finally, after I called a while ago. They sound close. The sirens are flashing. I see them through my window. I feel relieved. They opened the front door. I can hear them coming. I look in the mirror. It was me. All of it. I killed Chris. I killed the intruder. I killed the families. Those weren't dreams. They wear real life. "HANDS UP." I comply. "You are under arrest for the murders of 9 people. You have the right to stay silent, anything you say can and will be used against you in court." the cops say. "Pathetic."

Student Name: Helen Le

Grade: 8

School: O'Donnell Middle School

Title: People Watching

Category: Poetry

Key: Silver Key

Educator: Kaneisha Hicks

On the grassy patch where I rest
My eyes take a second guess
At the vulnerability of the scene
That I swear I only would've seen,
Somewhere in my dreams
Where the pictures repeat
To paint a story of my own

People watching
Is what they call it

But I can't help but feel alone
It's pitiful, isn't it?
To make up stories from the things I see
Only because I cannot be she
I can't live the blonde life, or the brunettes, or the ones with the pretty eye's life
For now, I can only fantasize

My eyes will glide as people walk past me
As my mind creates a muse
Of the few that walked past

They will never think of me again but their memory will last

But between the lines of the perfect fairytale of those I write in my head

There's a gleam of jealousy that stops me from resting in bed

The feeling that I can't shake off

The feeling that has me staring at the ceiling

All because I cannot foresee my own feelings

But why have I started watching or seeing?

What was so wrong with me and my well-being?

"I enjoy it," I say

"It helps spice up life" I answer

"People have so much to offer"

And that part is truthful

They do

People are an interesting species

The ones like you binge on TV

But the feelings I lack to receive

I paint a portrait so no one has to intervene

To feel the same emotions I do

I made an imagery of everyone living in bliss

So those lingering thoughts can be dismiss

I create a plan, like the mastermind I am

To live my cupid dreams

To create and scheme my own little world

In the palm of my hand

That in hopes one day will be held by another

But for now, I will sit on this grassy patch

Watching as people pass

I will hold my own hand in hopes that it'll be someone else

And maybe, just maybe it'll last

So I won't have to people-watch anymore

Instead, it'll be mine to adore

Student Name: Jenny Luong
Grade: 10
School: Kerr High School
Title: Remembering Through Words
Category: Personal Essay & Memoir
Key: Silver Key
Educator:

Serendipity was my grandma's favorite word. To her, it was a soft breeze that rustled through the pages of our lives, a whispered promise that unexpected joys could be found in the most ordinary moments. It meant stumbling upon laughter in the midst of tears, finding a rainbow after a storm, or, in our case, discovering the magic woven into the letters of a scramble game. It was the gentle reminder that life's sweetest moments often unfold when we least expect them, just like the joy hidden within a seemingly random jumble of letters. Serendipity wasn't merely a word; it was the invisible thread that wove through our connection, turning the act of forming words into a shared journey of whimsy. As we reveled in the enchantment of forming words in late-night scramble sessions, Grandma's laughter, laced with the essence of serendipity, resonated like a melodic reminder that life's magic often lies in the simplest, unexpected places.

Our relationship, grounded in shared laughter and the click-clack of letter tiles, was a sanctuary where the magic of words unfolded. Much like my grandmother, I've always held a deep appreciation for words—the way they rest in your mouth, their meanings, and how they're savored. I find joy in the artistry of stringing words into sentences, tracing my hand over them as I flip through the pages of books, opting for handwritten cards for birthdays, and pinning small notes onto my corkboard. Grandma, with her gentle encouragement, became the nurturing force behind my love for language. Our love language revolved around words—whether they were expressions of reassurance, appreciation, love, or the simple exchanges of good mornings and good nights. These spoken exchanges carried the weight of emotions and unspoken truths that went beyond the mere confines of language. They were our silent promises, shared laughter, and late-night confessions—more profound than words could ever capture.

Life, however, inscribed its unpredictable narrative, introducing an unexpected antagonist into Grandma's story—cancer. As this unwelcome guest took residence in her body, 'serendipity' transformed from a whimsical term to a poignant reminder of life's fragility. Yet, in the face of adversity, Grandma wielded her favorite word like a shield. Her resilience mirrored the strategic moves in our scramble games, turning seemingly random letters into meaningful expressions.

Amidst the harsh reality of illness, Grandma held on to her mobile word games, enticed by advertisements that pledged protection against the aging and dulling of the mind caused by the passage of time— a quirky rebellion against the encroaching shadows. In those quiet moments, she immersed herself in the virtual world of letters, each swipe a defiance against the limitations her weakening body imposed. The games, once a source of entertainment, became an act of courage. As the disease progressed, I found myself pondering the motivation behind her persistent engagement with word games. Was it a strategic move to keep her mind sharp, or a subtle attempt to ward off the fear of forgetting—forgetting words, forgetting cherished moments, forgetting me? The uncertainty mirrored the complexities of the scramble board, each decision carrying the weight of unforeseen consequences.

Through her illness, I came to learn a new word, stoicism, the art of pretending all is well when it's not, as it became her daily performance. In the midst of pain, she wore a brave smile, shielding those around her from the harsh reality of her deteriorating health. Her laughter echoed through the halls, masking the silent screams of her weakening body. Yet, her resilience mirrored the grace of a well-played word, turning the seemingly ordinary into something extraordinary. In her final moments, surrounded by the hushed symphony of beeping monitors, the word that echoed within me was 'petrichor.' The scent of rain on dry earth served as a metaphor for the bittersweet release of grief. It permeated the air, lingering like the echo of her laughter. As she slipped away, I realized that grief wasn't a complicated puzzle; it was a simple, poignant word—'petrichor.' Navigating the aftermath, I find solace in the simplicity of our shared lexicon. Each word, each memory, is a nod to the serendipity that colored our bond. The scramble games may have ceased, but the echoes of our shared language continue to resonate.

Nostalgia is my favorite word. To me, it's the longing to return to a place that carries the comforting weight of home. It's the memories of the scramble games Grandma and I once shared, where each letter was a small portal to a world of laughter and connection. Yet, it also embodies the bittersweet comfort within the sadness of remembering. It's a wistful glance at the life we once had, stored in vintage Polaroid photos that hold the echoes of shared joy and the passing of time. Within the embrace of nostalgia, I uncover fragments of joy in reminiscing about moments with Grandma, and the grief that accompanies the realization that home is the time that has passed, the memories lost, and the feelings left behind—all intricately woven into the shared tapestry of Grandma's favorite word, serendipity.

Student Name: Emily Posada

Grade: 8

School: O'Donnell Middle School

Title: Silent Struggles

Category: Poetry

Key: Silver Key

Educator: Kaneisha Hicks

In a land of dreams, where hope unfolds,
Lived my mother from Salvador, brave and bold.
She works so hard, from sunrise to sunset
In the land of freedom, her dreams were set.

"Hola, ¿cómo estás, hija?" she'd say with a smile
Her love and warmth, making life worthwhile.
Through her struggles and tears, she'd always say
"Todo está bien hija, don't worry, okay?"

In the kitchen, she'd cook with love so pure,
A taste of Salvador in every dish, for sure.
Her hands worked magic, in pots and pans,
A journey from her native lands.

Late nights, she'd work, under the city lights so bright,
Cleaning and trying, reaching new heights.
Her tired hands are a sign of strength and hope,
A symbol of courage, in this foreign place.

In English, she'd share her day

"Tiring day at work, hija," in a soft and caring voice.

She'd reassure, though sleepy and tired

"I'm okay, mija," her spirit never went out of fire.

An 8th grader worries, a heart feeling tight,

Thinking of Mom every day and night.

In every "okay," a bit of pain,

Like raindrops on a window, falling.

Homework is done, dreams begin to fly,

Mom, my guide, a shining light.

Her dreams for me, like stars so high,

Sparkling so bright in the U.S. sky.

Here's to the mother from El Salvador so brave,

From her home to American land.

A story of strength, love, and being strong,

In the heart of her family.

Student Name: Goodluck Eze

Grade: 9

School: Kerr High School

Title: sincerely

Category: Poetry

Key: Silver Key

Educator: Safraz Ali

In sincerity, I plea, just let me be,
Told people, "get off me," in this life's decree.
For y'all, the ones who resent and condemn,
Your hearts echo emptiness, a condemning hymn.

My heart cries out, a desperate plea to repent,
While yours screams, a void that's never spent.
Through the masses, I see with clear sight,
The glasses shattered, revealing a darker night.

Your heart, like molasses, thick and dark,
Faker than plastic, leaving a lasting mark.
Longing for a world, elastic and vast,
In this rap, words wielded, a weapon to cast.

Look into her eyes, a glimpse of paradise,
While the world erupts, in chaos, it lies.
Children fighting, a struggle to survive,
In these words, a weapon, words that revive.

A world perceived, unrecognizable, it seems,
Praying like Sudany, chasing distant dreams.
One day, as the sun's rays gently play,
May the guns be silenced, a brighter day.

Student Name: Shadrack Akinkunmi

Grade: 11

School: Kerr High School

Title: Status Epilepticus

Category: Poetry

Key: Silver Key

Educator: Ayn Nys

Be not defeated by health's eclipse,
The world flips, positions twist.
Antiseptic scents, shudders persist,
Siren's cries, my ears they grip.

Left only with chills, in shadows, we slip,
Bright white sears, my retinas resist.
Hands wander lost, in this eerie space,
Blinding beams, their relentless chase.

Blurry sands, like time's swift race,
Words escape, groans in endless space.
Head pounding, the ceaseless race we face,
Ouch, a plea, a silent wheeze.

End this agony, bring sweet release,
Seized in flames, unseen, dance and tease.
Memories flood, in this fateful trance,
Torment fierce, a tougher stance.

Deep fried by unseen fire,

Glares stripped of all festering desire.
Pain and anxiety, above they loom,
Whispered voices of impending doom.

Looks of fear ignite the trauma,
Looked down upon like dust, fauna.
Stares of pity fill their eyes,
Fuel myriads of muted cries.

Electrocuted echoes conclude their lance,
Buzz, buzz, crackles, breaks enhance.
No more, I beg, end these aches,
Be not defeated by health's quakes.

Days slip by, weeks in their sweep,
Seeking comfort, a quest, so fruitless.
From health's embrace, my spirit speaks,
Attempts to stand up are useless.

Strength's stature, life unwound,
Muscles rebel, control unbound.
Being strong, it seems, makes it worse,
Traverse the cycle - pains adverse.

The past three days, memory fades, elusive,
I plead, no more, this cycle's exclusive.
Through months and days, a trembling intrusive,

Tears speckled, nothing's conclusive.

But there's a time to stop working, a time to play,

A time to relax, let the night's cares sway.

Mayest not how,

That time is not now.

I endured the hail,

Pressed through relentless rain,

For I would not be defeated,

My spirit would rise again.

Through trials faced, life's storms allayed,

I survived the battle, undeterred, unswayed.

In this fight, scars may trace,

Yet here I stand, in life's glimmering embrace.

Student Name: Sarah Estefan
Grade: 9
School: Kerr High School
Title: Stuck In the Past
Category: Personal Essay & Memoir
Key: Silver Key
Educator: Safraz Ali

One of the many ways I describe my childhood is that it was a time of discovery. The memories of my youth stretch from the hours I spent in front of the TV watching Disney to the excitement of Christmas and how I would indulge in any new toy I fortunately got. Like any young kid, I was naive, but most importantly, I felt content. However, the times of excitement eventually lessened, and I didn't feel the same as when I was a child. When I got older, I saw how the "real world" works. Society doesn't go on as sugarcoated. Suddenly, my vibrant perspective as a kid was dialed down to almost "bare"... The truth is I was growing up. While I could complain about growing up and the lurking expectation of responsibility around the corner, that is not what I feel resentment for. As illogical as it sounds, I feel bitterness toward time. I don't experience this because I'm scared for the future; instead, I wish the era of my youth had more of it. As for me now, nostalgia doesn't only carry happiness; it brings me a bittersweet sensation that gets more damaging year after year.

Realization & Fear

Nothing can prepare you for growing up. No matter how the media displays it, the feeling it produces is not genuine. You are supposed to feel something, but truthfully, that emotion is brought on by the scripted and polished scene or, in better words, a fake connection. Considering how open-minded I was as a kid, I do not doubt that I fell into that specific digital trap and worse. I gathered my growing-up expectations based on what I saw, not knowing I indulged in a "sweetened" version of life. I carried on with that view for a while, so much so that I felt like every poor drawing created or song I heard on the radio was blissful. However, at some point, those sweet interactions suddenly felt like a sour aftertaste. I realized that some people have ill intentions and are willing to execute anything to get what they want. Some prefer to be silent, acting like a coward, but deep down, they know what they wish to achieve. There were also times when I felt numb and emotionally drained because the situations around me required so much of my energy to the point that I could not focus on other ideas. Suddenly, all of the vivid parts of life were stripped bare, leaving young me and my mind dull.

Initially, I shook it off as temporary; the naive part of me believed that this experience would pass and I would learn from it. Like a mistake, you feel the effects of your faults but learn how to avoid them in the future, as if you're viewing a short film in your mind. Unsurprisingly, I was wrong. Believing them to be "constant mistakes" turned out to be

distress as the rush of negativity returned; each “phase” would get more intense. Sooner or later, this felt like a “horror movie,” where my feelings were the eerie clues, and the killer didn’t cause me physical harm but left my mind blank with agitation. That young child was now fearful of the future – my personification of reality was now of a scary, cold-hearted criminal.

“You take more than I can give.”

To this day, I love art, and while my skill isn't at the level of a committed artist, creating art always brings me happiness. There was always something about mixing simple materials to create a new item that made me feel content. Another interest I’ve had since childhood was music. For some, music is just a combination of sounds, but in my eyes, music is a form of expression. Various notions can be delivered through music, as musicians write how they feel and save it in time as lyrics, almost like an artifact of their place in society. These have been something I have loved for a long time, so much so that I have put a large amount of effort into learning more about it. However, sometimes I think my hobbies are just a fraction of what is left, like the eternal flame is fighting to stay lit. As ironic as it is, indulging in my interests can always lead to finding flaws. Deep down, I know the mess of my thoughts is slowly tainting what is left of my childhood.

Ideally, the mind and body should act as one, but sometimes they act as two completely different beings, almost like they are sworn enemies. The mind can act like a parasite, throwing out comments until they spill over and cause the body physical repulsion for anything. Sadly, this happens when I engage in what I love and let it get the best of me and the little girl who loved it, too. The hobby that was a part of my personality was now something I could only do when I had the chance/when I felt like it. My body could push on for hours, trying to create a piece I would love, but my mind took the upper hand. Suddenly, my proud creations were overshadowed by a wave of criticism, making me ashamed of what I was passionate about. In other words, my mind sees my body as a target, throwing whatever it can to make an impact. Eventually, the “target” becomes bruised, even if there seems to be no more space for injury. However, my mind continues, damaging the target beyond healing, draining it of all the liveliness I have. My physical form sometimes feels like the aftermath of a battleground, with dark and cloudy skies similar to my mind, but deep down, I know I have done this to myself. My “great” expectations as a pure and naive kid have fired back, making me miss the carefree feeling of youth while I’m drained to almost nothing.

“I Feel...”

“How do you feel?” This a phrase I remember being asked a ton when I was a toddler, and I would almost always respond from the heart with a joyful “I feel great!” “I feel amazing!” or an unaltered and content, “I feel okay.” Responding felt straightforward as I did not have much to mask, as my most serious concern at the time was wondering what

toy I wanted under the tree. Sure, my emotions seemed simple, but they were filled with excitement and sometimes wonder, which I thought would be the “normal” for the rest of my life. At some point, that youthful flame of wonder was extinguished, and a new one was lit under entirely different circumstances.

An occasional negative thought is okay. I say that in a sense that nobody is perfect, and sometimes life doesn't follow the idea we imagined, but when that occasionally becomes 24/7, then that's when I notice there is something “wrong” with me. Often, there are stages of denial, and I will pass it off as “I'm just stressed at the moment” or “I'm very focused on the important things in life right now,” but I often wonder why the new “normal” for my feelings just excuses that downplay the truth? –The hard fact is that I managed to let the genuine joy I felt as a child slip, possibly letting it go for good. Now, all I have left is the numerous cover-ups I scrap together because the kid in me wants to be honest, but I don't think I have the heart for it. The dream-like situations I made in my head as a juvenile have finally come into sight, but they are much more complicated than I thought, completely shattering my tainted reality. I'm not just a singular bright flame anymore; I've been engulfed in a blazing inferno that I doubt can be removed in a single attempt.

All of a sudden, lying about my emotions is a constant scapegoat I always find myself reaching for. I did not want to let go of my emotional honesty, but my mind was so shocked by a sudden reality check that it was willing to throw away anything that did not seem like it was for the best. Ultimately, my mind goes blank. Thinking about how closed off my personality is now compared to as a child makes me feel melancholic. There isn't a day when I relish and wish to relive the period of life when I was so content. My brain was never overwhelmed by the pressure or dealing with the complete hurricane I'd created to contain my emotions somehow; it was simply a kid's. Since then, if you ask me how I feel now, I can't guarantee that it will be authentic: “I feel okay,” just a lie based on what I truly wish for.

As of Now

As of now, I feel regretful. Nothing else can best describe this emotion as I wish I could take back whenever I say, “I wish I could grow up,” because now it brings me so much confusion. I wondered where that young and bright little girl was and how much I wanted to preserve her mind in a frame, almost like she never left. While I've attempted to mature, it's because I tried to protect a girl's innocence, one I think deserved more time to be a kid. There is now a thick shell, maybe just a pathetic excuse built over the years to cover up what was left of a vigorous heart. The reality is that the world will turn whether I'm ready for it. One day, I hope I don't have to lie or that I can enjoy my fascinations with absolute satisfaction. I want to take back the enjoyment that got left in the dust. Just one day, I want to feel okay about the passing of time. As of now, time is a thief... lurking in a museum filled with many valued items to take.

Student Name: Angelina Le
Grade: 9
School: Alief Early College High School
Title: swollen kisses and purple bruises;
Category: Poetry
Key: Silver Key
Educator: Arkisha Cooper

stage 1: youngblood

youngblood

i'm not crying because of your vanished presence
the sea salt tears that are streaming down my face are born-
from the pain you inflicted with your hollow promises

youngblood

im independent,
self assured--
yet my knees are bore with purple marks
and maybe i wasn't fully deflowered
but there were some unspeakable actions i know—
i can never take back
i was forced but hey—
to you, it was just another 'romantic kink' you fancied.

deceiving oneself is a path to nowhere
reporting you can't take back all the damaged you caused,
i speak of self-control, which means there must be some self-respect too
your actions wounded me profoundly,
shaking the foundation of my self-worth-

made me question my own dignity
are you satisfied?

stage 2: its you, not me

you chose to chase after her—
right after your eyes
intertwined with mines
i hope guilt straps you with vines

“i think id seen this film before
and i didn’t like the ending”
you lied
am i surprised?

a medusa marked on my skin
to never forget the state you left me in
must i learn pain's bite so young?
i knew i shouldn't have clung

day after day, another glance--
i was nothing.
no thought to give before withdrawing
you blamed me, but the fault lies in you
and the love you failed to stay true

i said i would forever stay your friend

that i would be glad to stay on good terms
maybe we had something in common.
i lied,
except guilt wasn't there to offend
because ending on bad terms is the only way,
we'll be able to make amends.

stage 3: boundaries broken, love forsaken

amongst everyone i've known,
why my close friend
i can't bear to meet her gaze
my heart races at a slight glimpse of her
will i ever look at her the same?
i swear i'm going insane
this lover was different,
he didn't lead me on-
it was the opposite, so inconsiderate
still, am i the one to blame?

my thoughts couldn't be executed
i knew i had to leave
the words came out as muted
leaving me behind to grieve

you unleashed your pain untamed,
then left me in despair
you can't just walk away, unnamed,
purple bruises, swollen kisses, and scars i wear

you trespassed boundaries with your touches,
i could barely even breathe
left me clutching at crutches
yet, i chose to keep it a secret from beneath

the echoes of you persist and stay,
haunting me til the break of day
your deeds, like a bell, they chime,
setting off tears like niagara falls in canada's prime
you claim to be a man of divine grace,
yet, you're a sinner, a foul embrace.

Student Name: Zaidde Meza
Grade: 8
School: O'Donnell Middle School
Title: That's what happens when you fall in love
Category: Poetry
Key: Silver Key
Educator: Kaneisha Hicks

Bathed in moonlight's gentle glow,
Our souls entwined, a love that flows,
Like whispers in the night, soft and slow,
We dance in this heavenly tableau.

Your touch, a tender serenade,
Melting hearts in this blissful cascade,
Our bodies intertwine, a perfect charade,
Lost in a moment that will never fade.

With every kiss, we transcend time,
In this ethereal realm, love's sublime,
Our hearts harmonize, a rhythm divine,
Creating a melody that's uniquely ours to find.

Heavenly, our love's sweet refrain,
A symphony that knows no pain,
In your arms, I'm forever sustained,
In this song of love, we're forever ingrained.

Student Name: Joann Lui
Grade: 9
School: Kerr High School
Title: The Beautifully Nature by my Side
Category: Poetry
Key: Silver Key
Educator: Safraz Ali

I wondered, as lonely as a cloud,
gazing at a crowd from above the sky
Feeling a sense of isolation

I am a desert without an oasis,
Who has no friends to share my sorrows,
I am a tree without leaves
Where no one seems to come near

I am as lonely as a missing puzzle
With nowhere left to fit.

I see that my loneliness is like a dark cloud
Always following me around

As I hear the birds singing,
The wind sways through the tall grass and leaves like waves in a calm sea,
There sits a flower blooming
It is a soldier, standing in the middle of the attention
When I wished I had realized sooner that nature has always been by my side.

Student Name: Rebekah Draper

Grade: 11

School: Kerr High School

Title: The Curse of Eve

Category: Short Story

Key: Silver Key

Educator: Ayn Nys

Sarah Beth was barely eleven that hot Sunday morning. The Texas heat was creeping in as every fan in this small town was blowing as hard as it could, fighting back against the boiling humidity.

It was a typical Sunday morning that started with over-easy eggs and burnt bacon. Sarah Beth ate her breakfast and washed it down with a cup of bitter orange juice, watching Daddy drink his cup of nice-smelling coffee and Mama put on her Sunday pearls. Once she had finished her breakfast, she walked out of the kitchen, suddenly noticing a strange and foreign pain in her stomach.

"Sarah Beth, wear your new dress today," Mama called out to her from the kitchen. "Pastor John is talking about something important in class."

"Yes, Mama." Sarah Beth obliged but couldn't help feeling a stalking irritation pressing into her from every little thing. An anger she couldn't place. Why was she feeling this way?

Sarah Beth found the new dress Mama bought for her hanging on the knob of her chest of drawers. A white tea-length dress stared back at her. It was an endless mess of itchy flowery lace, tied together with a silk bow in the back. Begrudgingly, she put it on and met her parents in the car.

The car's AC blasted as they drove from their small one-story home to the high-ceilinged church. Daddy and Mama dropped Sarah Beth at the small Sunday School building next to the church as they departed, walking into the sanctuary. Stepping oddly because of her toe-pinching shoes, Sarah Beth walked into the cool Sunday School room. She was met with Pastor John and about nine other bratty kids.

"Welcome home, Sarah Beth." Pastor John said as he reached a hand out to her.

She shook it and quietly sat down in the front row of cold metal fold-up chairs, trying to hide from the other kids.

"Pastor John? Isn't being late a sin? And isn't Sarah Beth late?" The sticky stuck-up boy who spoke was Bradley. He had picked on Sarah Beth since the second grade. He was

either pulling her hair or tripping her in the halls. Mama said he just likes her but it never felt like he did.

"And if you sin, won't you go to hell?" Bradley whispered hot breath into her ear and she swatted him away like a buzzing fly.

"Go away, Bradley." She whimpered, trying to act tough but the fear of going to hell quickly buried itself deep inside her.

"Now, now. Do I need to separate you two?"

"I was just trying to help Sarah, you know. Make sure she doesn't go to hell." Bradley's face turned into an exaggerated pout, making Sarah Beth boil.

"It's Sarah Beth." She grimaced, through a wave of anger she couldn't control.

"It's ok Bradley. I understand you just want to help our friend, how considerate. Now, Sarah Beth, you must not get so angry at him. He is just trying to help you. You've got to get that anger under control or you'll sin. And we wouldn't want that, would we?"

"No." She mumbled, keeping her flushed face down, away from everyone's view.

"Good, now apologize to Bradley. You shouldn't have gotten so angry at him."

"What?! But-but..." She was utterly shocked. She didn't mean to get angry at Bradley or swat at him but he deserved it.

"Now, Sarah Beth." Pastor John said firmly, staring right into her eyes.

"Sorry." Sarah Beth spits out through her clenched teeth.

"Good. Now should we start our lesson or is there supposed to be one more person." Pastor John scoured the room, counting each of their little heads until Sarah Beth heard the clacking of little heels down the hall outside.

A young woman walks in with a girl about Sarah Beth's age wrapped beneath her arm. The girl holds tightly onto her navy sweater and looks up at Pastor John.

"Hello, is umm this Pastor John's class?" The young woman asks.

"Why, yes indeed." A large smile appeared on Pastor John's face. He moved to the pair, shaking their hands and welcoming the girl in.

"This is my sister, Delilah. She's new in this class." The young woman said, ushering the girl forward.

"Well, welcome. Class, this is our new student, Delilah. Everyone welcome Delilah."

A mixture of mumbles from kids who couldn't care less and yells of boys too eager to have another girl in class to pick on replied.

The young woman leaves, waving the girl goodbye, and the girl silently moves to sit in the only empty chair left. Sitting in the back row. Her black Mary Janes clicked against the tile as she walked.

"Ok, now that we are all here we could start. Today we will talk about the original sin. Does anyone know what it is?"

Sarah Beth raised her hand high, eager excitement pumping through her. Usually, she never raised her hand. Not in school. Not during the sermon. But this answer she knew. The knowledge that her father constantly quizzed her on and her mother always warned her about.

"Yes, Sarah Beth."

"Eve eating the forbidden fruit."

"Correct, Miss Sarah Beth." Pastor John's smile filled Sarah Beth with giddy pride.

"Today we will be learning about the original sin and how it still affects some of us today. How the consequences Eve faced are still punishing those sinful today" A grim feeling falls over the kids, leaving each one to settle down into a fearful listening.

"Now, Eve ate the forbidden fruit because the serpent tempted her. This caused her to go against God. You must not be tempted because then you will go to hell. Eating the fruit caused Adam and Eve to be cast out of paradise, cursing all of humanity forever as they fell from grace. Just like Lucifer."

His words created fear that rose in the children, it especially set fear deep into Sarah Beth's stomach as he continued, "This curse will be brought upon all girls in some time."

"Why only girls?" Pigtailed Jenny asked.

"Because Eve was the first woman. The example for all other women to come. And when she went against God, God knew that he had to set a punishment for all other women so they would not make the same mistakes Eve did. This was the easier way than sending all women to hell."

His words stole Sarah Beth's breath, leaving her panting and struggling for air as her ribs constricted around her lungs.

"Women are naturally sinful and their bleeding is their punishment. Every month, a woman will bleed as a reminder of Eve."

"When do women start bleeding?" Little freckled Lisa asked, confused by his words.

"Well, it's usually from the ages of 8 to 16, usually after they have committed a large sin. But don't worry. God will show you what to do if you just ask. Just ask for forgiveness and he shall forgive you. But every time you bleed you must understand that you are

sinning. You are dirty and sinful, so you must stay away from any man. Or else you might pass on the sin to him and you wouldn't want to do that."

Silence came after every word Pastor John spoke. And the more he said the more Sarah Beth gripped the edge of her metal chair with clammy hands, trying to ignore the growing churn and heat from her stomach ache.

"That is why women need men to survive, or else they will be lost to sin. They need men to tell them what to do because they can't control their actions. Women need men to keep them righteous or they will be lost to their naturally unclean and sinful self."

His words lurked just out of Sarah Beth's eyes. A danger behind her, beneath her. Satan is always around the corner, trying to get her to sin, tempting her. She was Eve and the fruit was everywhere.

"Now, let us read some scripture." He pauses, looking at the children.

"How about you Sarah Beth? Would you like to read?"

She couldn't hear his words, only hearing the pounding of the blood that was pumping in her ears. Anxiety gripped her organs, pulling them every which way, tearing her apart. The fear of sin mixed with the growing pain inside of her caused tears to swell in her eyes.

Was this it? Was God trying to pull her down to hell? Had she somehow fallen for one of the serpent's tricks? Satan's temptations? Was this her fall from grace?

"Sarah Beth?" He repeated, finally getting her attention by resting a light hand on her shoulder.

"Ye-yes, Pastor John?" Sarah Beth stuttered out, avoiding his gaze.

"Are you ok?"

"Umm, yes." She grounded herself in the classroom, trying her best to push past her thoughts.

"Ok. Would you please read some scripture for us?"

"Yes." She said as she patted down her lacey white dress and stood up on shaky legs, only to hear a ripple of gasps and shudders from behind her.

Girls screeched and the boys gawked, the noise gathered from behind her. Every child was kicking their feet up and screaming at the sinful sight. The classroom launched itself fully into a fit of hysteria.

Blood poured into Sarah Beth's face as she moved her hand to touch the back of her dress. It was damp and sticky. Slowly she moved her hand to her face, to see the red stain on her fingertips.

“Oh my gosh!!! Sarah Beth is bleeding! She’s a sinner!!!” Bradley threw his body back in laughter as he encouraged the boys to point and laugh at her.

Heat radiated inside her and shame washed over her face. This was the end, all her sins had finally added up and she would be punished. She was Eve and the serpent had come for her.

The kids shouted all around her, consuming her with their words. “Sarah Beth! Sarah Beth! Look at her sin! EW! DIRTY! SINFUL!” The murder of children gawked and screeched. Giggling, till their faces shone as red as the blood on the back of Sarah Beth’s dress.

“Now everyone. Everyone settle down!” Pastor John yelled, trying to calm down the crazed children. “Sarah Beth just has to pray and she will be forgiven. Sarah Beth? Sarah Beth? It’s time for you to pray, just repent and everything will be ok.”

His words were lost on Sarah Beth. She was utterly frozen in the fall, descending to hell right before them, falling like Lucifer fell. Bleeding like Eve. Dirty and sinful.

“Sarah Beth?” Pastor John came closer, slowly resting his hand on her shoulder. She stayed still, unmoving while a storm roared inside her. “Come now, it's praying time.” He slightly shook her, trying to draw out some sort of response, but Sarah Beth was an empty statue. Lost to the world and fallen from grace. He grabbed her arm and pulled it forward, finally snapping her out of her frozen state.

“I’m-I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to sin. Please forgive me, God. Please...” She sobbed, ripping her arms out of Pastor John’s grip and running out of the classroom. She pounded her tightly packed toes against the tile, running as if each tile she stepped on would fall. As if Satan was clawing at her ankles trying to pull her down. Sarah Beth ran down the hall to the bathroom, locked herself in the large stall, and jumped when she accidentally slammed the door.

She looked at the burgundy blood that had thoroughly stained her underwear, seeping to the back of her dress. Frantically she tried to clean it up, wiping her clothing with a mess of toilet paper and tears she couldn’t see through. Eventually, she gave up when she realized she was only making the stains worse.

Sarah Beth released a horrid sob, wrapping her arms around herself and breathing uncontrollably. She shook her body back and forth as she quietly repeated to herself, “Oh God, I am sorry. I am so sorry God. Please take away this curse. Please have mercy on me. I didn't mean to sin. I didn't mean to, I promise. You must understand. Forgive me. Forgive me for whatever sin I have committed. Oh Lord, please. Please forgive me, have mercy. Please. I don’t want to go to hell. I don’t want to die. Please. I don’t want to die. Please.” Her words were no more than a whisper, as she continued to repeat her plea.

She waited for an answer, for God to say that she was forgiven and this was all some big mistake. But deep inside she knew that God didn't make mistakes. Everything that happened was for a reason she would never grow to understand. This was all her fault. Her sin. Her fall from grace.

The bathroom door opened, and a light click of shoes entered. The sound came closer to Sarah Beth, only scaring her more. Every awful fear she has ever had came to the surface. Maybe the Angel of Death had come to take her. "Oh please. Please. I don't wanna die. I don't wanna die. Please, God. Please." The footsteps stopped, and black Mary Janes peaked out from under her stall. This was her end.

"You're menstruating." A sweet light voice said from outside the bathroom stall. "The blood. It's your menstrual cycle." Her words left Sarah Beth in a twister of confusion. What was menstruating? Did she mean the Curse of Eve?

"Here." She spoke again, this time frightening Sarah Beth when she stuck her hand under the stall, presenting a brightly floral patterned square.

Slowly and cautiously, Sarah Beth took the square and held it delicately in her hands. "Thank you." Sarah Beth mumbled, confused about what she had just been given. She felt embarrassment fill in her bright red cheeks, but she had to ask the question. "What is it?" She asked, turning the brightly colored square over in her hands.

"It's a pad." The sweet voice came back to her. "You put it in your underwear, it's supposed to absorb the blood. So it doesn't...you know..." She didn't finish the sentence, knowing it would only cause more embarrassment to well up in Sarah Beth.

"Oh. So how does-" Sarah Beth cut herself off, trying her best to speak through all the turmoil inside of her.

"You open it and stick it to your underwear. You just need to-" The sweet voice clicked her shoes a couple of times against the bathroom tile, trying to think of the best way to explain it. "Here." She tapped on the stall handle, "If you just let me in I could show you. I think it would be easier."

"No, no I think I-" Sarah Beth mumbled through tears, but after a few frantic seconds of failing to figure it out she finally accepted her help. She unlatched the bathroom stall and was met face-to-face with the new girl in her Sunday school class.

"Hi, Sarah Beth." The new girl stared back at her, slowly moving in.

"Hi, Deborah."

"It's Deliah."

"Oh, I'm sorry." Sarah Beth almost burst back into tears at that moment, but Deliah rested a small hand on her jaw. "It's ok. Well, get through this together."

Slowly and carefully explaining each instruction Deliah helped Sarah Beth. Holding onto her every time Sarah Beth felt like she was going to let go, as though she was going to drown herself in an ocean of her tears. Guiding her out of the Valley of Shadow of Death, until they reached the promised land.

"Thank you, Delilah."

"You're welcome." Right then it became apparent how close the two girls were. Their faces flushed as an unsure silence crept in. Delilah spoke first "And you know, it's not really a sin. It's natural."

"Natural?"

"Yeah, normal. Why would God make something natural a sin?"

"Wha-"

"My sister thinks it's just another way for them to make women feel bad. For them to control us."

"Why would they want to do that? Isn't it just God's way?"

"I don't know. But here, take my sweater." Deliah took off her navy sweater and handed it to Sarah Beth. "Wrap it around your waist and it will hide the stain."

"Thank-thank you."

"Let's go, Sunday school should be over soon."

"Yeah."

The two girls walked out of the bathroom, not bothering to go back to class, just leaving the building to meet their families in the parking lot. Sarah Beth went to her parents without saying what had happened. Though they might have already heard something from Pastor John or one of those snotty kids.

But Delilah's words repeated in her head. Was there really a Curse of Eve? Or was Pastor John lying to her? Why did Deliah help her? Did God forgive her for her sins? Did he forgive Eve?

Student Name: Angel Garcia

Grade: 8

School: Alief Middle School

Title: The Forgotten Note

Category: Flash Fiction

Key: Silver Key

Educator: Brenda Peters

In a small town nestled between rolling hills and meandering streams, there stood an ancient oak tree with gnarled branches that reached out like the hands of a wise elder. Its roots delved deep into the earth, connecting the past to the present in a silent dance of resilience.

Underneath the oak's sprawling canopy, there was a weathered bench that bore witness to countless stories. On a crisp autumn day, a gentle breeze carried with it the scent of fallen leaves and a sense of nostalgia. A young woman named Emma found herself drawn to the oak, seeking solace amidst the rustling leaves and the distant murmur of the town.

As Emma sat on the bench, she noticed a tattered piece of paper caught in the branches above her. With a curious gaze, she reached up and carefully plucked it free. The paper, yellowed with age, unfolded to reveal handwritten words that seemed to have weathered the passage of time.

"I hope this note finds you well," the elegant script began. Emma felt an inexplicable connection to the unknown author, as if the words were meant for her alone. The note unfolded a tale of love, loss, and the bittersweet symphony of life. It spoke of dreams pursued and dreams left behind, of struggles faced and triumphs celebrated.

As she read, Emma felt a kaleidoscope of emotions. The author's experiences resonated with her own, as if the oak tree itself whispered shared secrets. The note became a bridge across generations, linking the past with the present.

Intrigued, Emma began to imagine the person behind the handwritten words. Was it a lover pouring out their heart to a distant soulmate? Or perhaps a traveler leaving behind a

piece of their journey for a kindred spirit to discover? The possibilities were endless, and the mystery added a touch of enchantment to her day.

With a newfound sense of connection, Emma carefully refolded the note and tucked it back into the branches of the oak tree. As she walked away, she couldn't shake the feeling that she had stumbled upon a fragment of someone else's story, a fleeting glimpse into the intricate tapestry of human experience.

The forgotten note, once lost in the folds of time, had found a temporary custodian in Emma. And as she left the oak tree behind, she carried not only the mysterious words but also a reminder that stories, like whispers in the wind, have the power to transcend time and touch the hearts of those willing to listen.

Student Name: Alean Umana
Grade: 9
School: Alief Hastings Ninth Grade Center
Title: The Light to hope
Category: Dramatic Script
Key: Silver Key
Educator: Jamye Robinson

I was walking home , from a late snowy Monday afternoon. Smoking my last cigarette , I sighed with relief because of a long day. I did not want to admit the fact that I hated everything surrounding me as I walked by, and that my addiction as well as my lifestyle made me feel miserable, my job , my life , and me. At the time I didn't know any better. I was a stoner and with a bad addiction to cigarettes, I would smoke everyday to relieve myself from such misfortune I had in life. I was just a bad example as many mothers who would always see me walk through explain to their children.

My job was a low paying job, as a cashier in an old gasoline station , well I did more than being the cashier. I would clean and restack everything that was missing , just to keep the old gasoline station running. This job was far from the city that I would have to ride the bus to get there, and if I ever missed the bus then, I would only have to walk no matter how the weather was that day. Because I needed the money and it was the only job that I could get the position for because of my bad reputation I had when I was a teen and in my time in prison. But I knew I could not argue about this job because it was the only job that accepted me. The owner of the old gasoline station was a lonely old man in his late 60s , he couldn't run the store alone. I only had very few customers every day, most of which were alcoholics , drug addicts , wierdows, and some few pedestrians. Because of my job I was hanging on a rope. I needed this job.

Back in the city it was also very obvious that I was a society wreck. I had no friends or relatives near me since everyone I knew aparted themselves from me. So most of the time I would talk to myself , turning me into a reserved person. The only support that I had came from an abandoned homeless dog, who I gave food , once and the day and later started to follow me everywhere I went. So everyone thought he was my dog. But I knew I could not keep him even if I wanted to, due to me barely living off with the little money I made everyday. I never named him, but he would always wag his tail in excitement when he would see me. To be honest I liked his companion. He was always outside waiting for me. Many times because of that dog , if it wasn't for him I would lose my mind and my sanity. Sometimes too when I would have nothing to eat he would

accompany me as we both staved, as if he wanted to remind me to be hopeful. Even with his companion I felt alone, wanted to know if another person felt the same way as I felt.

I had spented my Thanks giving all alone and without any money. Christmas was around the corner. In my way to work I could see the happy kids playing in the snow with their friends and relatives , the beautiful ornaments and decorations outside of the streets and inside homes, people cheerfully singing in delight filled with the Christmas spirit. I felt left out. Taking the bus that morning, I saw from the window the dog running to catch the bus. I didn't mind because I knew he wasn't going to catch me. As the last thing I heard from him before he stopped running behind the bus were two barks. When I got to the gasoline station I usually got the keys from Lupe, the guy to takes the night shift and I would sit and wait for any customers or when I needed to do something around the store. It was about 11:28 am when I saw the sliding doors from the store open, so I got up from my chair ready to do my job. But I had seen no one enter. I was confused. " Hello , welcome" I said out loud. I finally saw a short man approaching me. "Hello young man ! do you happen to have some cold soft drinks here?" "yes" I said "You can see them if you go back" "Thank you" he said. He paid for his drink and some snacks, and then left the same way he had came. Nothing unusual.

I attended to a few other customers and it was almost time for my closing shift. "Just one hour and I go home, just make it through 7:00." I thought to myself. And because of winter there were shooter days and longer nights so it was pretty dark already and I just wanted to go home. I glanced at the cameras above me for a while and looked back to the lonely cold store. I got up from my seat to get myself something to snack on when I felt a cold chilling sensation in the back of my neck. I noticed that everything outside of the store was dead silent and strangely calm. I was weird because behind the store was a dark deep forest, and I could hear all the animals outside even in the winter. But everything was quiet. So I glanced back at the cameras again. Hurriedly I rushed to the counter from where I was supposed to be. I was quiet for a few minutes. Those few minutes felt like hell. I was overthinking the possible scenarios I could be in. "BARK, BARK, BARK" I jolted from my seat.

I was confused. How did he find me? How did he get to me and why? How did he?- D-did he take all day on the solitary road near the forest that I take every day to get to work?- trying to find me? And if so why come so far?

I looked at him and noticed he was looking back at me. We exchanged looks, and I decided to keep him with me until it was time to go home, so I hid him in the back of the

store . In the meantime I still had to work, so none the less I sat down again with the companion of the dog. SSKK KERR!!! A weird noise coming from outside interrupted my thinking. I peaked from the window. A large white van with dark windows stopped in front of the gasoline station. A man in his forties with a weird look in his face approached the gasoline station alongside a toddler. It was weird...because he did not look like he could take care of a child. He had ragged clothes stained with a strictly unknown substance , and a big white pointy beard, he smelled awful...He smelled like some rotten corpse. The same was for the kid, he too looked the same, with the appearance of not being properly taken care of. The kid looked familiar, awfully familiar.

I thought the kid was kidnaped at first. But now I didn't know what was happening. I was especially confused with this revelation. I stood quiet. "HEY you are taking long!" The kid got up and got whatever snack he could get. I stood up and grabbed him by the hand. " No kid you are staying with me until someone else can help you!" Wait what am I doing I can't protect this kid , and if i do what will be of me? What the fuck am I doing?

This isn't me , I am not brave , I am not strong, I am just a beat up man with no future ahead...I am done for even if I try to help. I am just a commoner, it won't matter if I die in this crappy gasoline station, there will only be more gossip about me eventually after two days be forgotten by everyone.

"BANG BANG" The door flew apart into pieces. The man was now inside pointing the gun right at me now.

At that moment my instincts and my memories of my past fights overran me and flowed me with power and rage. At that moment I had returned back, the will to want to live again. I wanted to live and I was not going to let the kid , the dog , or me die. I wanted to save them from this man. From my friendship with the dog this was the only time when he was violent towards someone, as a way to show his loyalty to me. The dog jumped at the man and pinned to the floor. I followed behind. BARK BARK BANG !!--The dog fell to the floor. My dog had died fighting for me. As the man got up to jump him, I forced the gun out of the man but no matter what I could not take it away from him so punched and

punched the man. To Be honest I did not hear the bullet entering my body , I just felt cold and dizzy. My ears were ringing , as I to fell to the floor. My eyes were heavy and then as the blood poured out of me I started to feel the pain that the bullied caused me. I looked up at the kid that was staring at me and I remembered why I was in that position. I blacked out.

I now write this story on my Typewriter in my office home surrounded by my warm cozy house filled with a lot of love from my loving family and neighbors, that I now have found my purpose and that I will forever have his love implanted in my heart for the rest of my last days here. Thank you "Finley," and I hope to see you soon.

Student Name: Zahra Razai
Grade: 10
School: Alief Taylor High School
Title: The Lightkeeper
Category: Short Story
Key: Silver Key
Educator: Zainab Jabak

The sky had a cold, fervent tint to it, a rich black that swallowed everything beneath. But somehow, the pier was alight regardless, as it seemed it always was; a torch-lit beacon, glittering and smoggy and somehow standing tall even entrenched in the night's grasp. A bit past the rocky hills and gravel sands of what could almost be considered a beach, at the end of a solemn, slender cobble path, stood a lone gangling edifice; its white light like a hand reaching to catch lost wanderers from roaming too far. The tower had stood for longer than any could remember, and no other time could better attest to that but now, late into the year where the inland's commodities did not reach them. Where unwary travelers, who'd made a gambit in the spring months, inevitably found that the stories of seafaring greatness were just stories.

Sometimes, the lighthouse would do its job and lead those astray back ashore. Sometimes it didn't. Most times, probably.

The sea turned into an ugly, unforgiving thing during the worst of months.

The sea's waters had turned into neptunian mass somewhere between sunset and now, from dull gray-blue to aglow sapphire pulse, with froths of frost barely visible before they were crushed beneath a new wave. The lightkeeper watched with morose hate, gloved hands barely fighting off the crisp chill. He had been there for longer than his brain wished to acknowledge, set on the edge of boredom and dread, standing leant on a window-sill, watching waves which would never have an end in sight. And for what?

The lightkeeper of this lighthouse wasn't an old man, yet felt no better than one, living as he was: shivering, rigid and almost-gone, even to himself. His face was lined and hard-set already, his gait panicky and his ears used to the tune of nothing but currents and that old violin he'd kept from when he first took the job. A violin he never really learned to play, yet kept, both a rare entertainment, whenever he decided to give it a foolhardy go, and

souvenir all at once. Once, many years ago, he'd almost thrown the raggedy instrument out the window in a fit of incoherence—that was when the old man who'd been keeping had died, a memory he tried not to dwell on—into the sea, but had not been able to let go of it. What else had he to call his own, but that wretched violin? What good would it do, for the waters to have that part of him too?

The sea was always close to sucking everything out of him, in that way. Leaving nothing but the barest bits of him, the frames of his being; and even those, its icy winds tried to knock over.

In spite of the cold, he couldn't be mad at the breeze on his face, by virtue of the way it helped dissipate those bouts of vagueness that came over him in misty, sickening episodes from time to time. All of a sudden everything would begin to swim and dissolve: the walls, with their garish floral wallpaper that began to rot at the corners such a long time ago, spinning and the colors twirling, melting before him—he had to shut his eyes—and there would be this humming noise, which at regular intervals rose to a crescendo and then drawlingly subsided again. He'd never forget it, he swore, that buzz that lodged itself a place in the worst parts of his brain. It was disorienting. He never knew what it was, his life was that of a solid routine, one he'd inherited; what could be causing it?

... From one of these spells, he opened his eyes and found himself still leant, head cradled in his hands, sore at the lower half of the back. The lighthouse keeper, like he'd done many times before, startled and peered out of the dirty glass. There was nothing. All was well. He relaxed a bit, then fell into another. From another spell he woke to see the sky an even darker pitch than he'd left it. Time had passed.

Once enough time passed, it would fall upon him to make the journey up the rickety old stairs and make sure the light which topped the hightower hadn't died, been impaired or, as he recalled thinking when he was younger, exploded. Now, that fear had been fully eroded, as if it was never there.

The light was the standard kind, registered legally, and had never given him no troubles. Except, perhaps, some nights... when he wandered too close to that eerie glow, when he could swear the pool of chemical which it slept on--no, no good to dwell. Delusion, that's what they were. Odd, impossible delusions birthed from a sorely deprived mind. And he had things to distract himself with, anyway.

It was for those desperately-needed distractions that he forced himself up. When he stood upright, his head pounded and his calloused hands tremored, but those faded eventually with the nausea. Hunger. The lighthouse never let it truly fade. He was a passable fisherman, and could round a decent amount of clams, if need be. Which very often ended up being. Yet the hunger persisted, made his muscles weak and twitchy. He knew that because, years ago, it wasn't a frayed man that passed off as sixty who took up the sole mantle of keeper. Once, the memory blurry as all things this close to the water were, it'd been a boy. A boy, green as grass, and more eager. The years had taken their toll on him, that boy, greedy and never-satisfied, swallowing the peaks and prime quickly and chewing through raggedy bone desultorily. Like a fat cat.

When the queasiness subsided, the lightkeeper found himself marching through the senescent doorframe, into halls with walls lined with framed images of the sea in mundanity and glorious story. He took a moment to just look at them, even though all had been gazed at countless times. Artful work, a few. A large warship fighting its way through the torrent of a storm at sea; how badly he wished it was so simple, so simple it was possible to fight the ocean into submission. Beside it, a small rowboat filled to the absolute brim with flax woven sacks of fish, shrimp, shellfish and oysters. In that one, the waters were calm, so serene the sunlight bounced off it like bright-blue crystal. In none of them were there mishaps, or men overboard, or mundane shallows. Where there should have been sharks and pirates, stood gigantic squid-monsters of legend. Cherubic mermaids, singing a siren song. Having lazed into the routine of it, his gaze ran over each one, committing the useless details into memory once again, before dragging his eyes away and toward the kitchen.

The space was gently—really barely—lit by gas light. It would be midnight soon.

An archway opening built into the plaster wall welcomed the lightkeeper to his kitchen. Space was a thing sorely lacking; the kitchen a small, cramped affair that he could make the entirety of with not even a sweep of his bleary, vaguely-burning eyes. All the better. It took less energy out of him to stomp across the dingy, discolored rug when it grasped at all four walls. An ancient cooker hissed next to a deep enamel sink, and a squat dresser was pushed against the opposite wall, displaying his favorite violin. A scrubbed wooden table took up the rest of the floorspace, and this was where he ended up, with his hands on the raggedy tabletop, head bowed, not remembering just how he'd gotten there. Not remembering anything, for a moment there.

But the moment passed, and the lightkeeper kept on moving. Hungry... he'd been hungry, he was hungry. He was hungry. Why? The foods that greeted him when slammed the cabinet-door open were dull and lifeless, and that was not conducive to a fuller belly. Jellied eels were not conducive to anything, he thought. Nor were marmalade.

The lightkeeper set out with a grim countenance, and knew somehow that he must have cut a sad picture if he were painting himself—yet there were no eyes to see him, or make a muse out of a sad man. There never were. The drawers he snapped wide open hinged, a rusty metallic shriek. He reached inside that drawer, full of carvers, and yanked out a knife. Glinting madly in the dim light, he could almost make out his haggard reflection on the blade's side. In that light, he could almost make out a figure tall and fair and glowy, like it was made of light... but when he coughed a rickety cough, and the bile rose inside him like a tide of its own, the figure was gone and he was alone again...

His meal ended up simple: slabs of stale un-toasted bread slathered, by trembling hands, with something shiny out of a shiny little jar... what it had been seemed so far away... he washed it down with wine periodically, a sappy-sweet fluid that clung more bitter than saccharine on his tongue when he was done with it.

When he was done with it, it seemed all was done.

But as the old man who'd called himself lightkeeper felt his head fall into his frail hands, and the fog come nearer, he could have sworn he'd seen a star made-flesh come even nearer. It's a touch bright-hot on his forearm. Still, and oh so calming—and, oh he'd been convulsing. He'd realized that too late, he thought, somehow unable to lift his gaze to meet the eyes of it—his head heavy as lead—

He was not convulsing anymore, had not been much of anything in a long while, nothing but a lightkeeper.

He longed to lean into it, the warmth emitting from the figure.

Did it have a face like the moon, whose other had remained so long-hidden?

He rose with a morose sadness. The chair groaned.

With numbness pervading his nerves, he opened the creaking door, stepped out into the cramped corridor, and continued up the stairs. His fingers gripped the spiral railing. The wood beneath his feet creaked with every step, as it always did. The top of the tower came up to him not too slowly, and he stepped out onto the highest floor, where the light stood, shinningly floating above a bath of mercury.

The beating in his head had gotten worse.

Much worse.

Pounding at the door, at the sides of his head, at each crash of waves—the humming had grown into a roar, and suddenly, for some inexplicable reason, the lightkeeper wanted nothing more than to escape the glowing light. If he'd just turn, perhaps he'd be well, perhaps the world would be silent. But he could not, would not. As he knew: he would have to maintain the light, if only so it would not go out and leave him in darkness. He had known all along he would have to. The light had, in however long he spent deliberating, turned so bright it was almost blue. A pale, pale blue that burned his eyes. If he didn't temper it, it would escape him and consume his lighthouse with smolder and ash.

When he was done with that, he turned melodically away, the buzz having long decided in the recesses of his control. Almost bearable. His wrists had turned clammy white, he saw as he turned the brass knob of the door. It did that sometimes. His vision blurred, blackened edges,

And when he opened the door, the figure's ghastly face greeted him.

Student Name: Irsah Naqvi
Grade: 8
School: O'Donnell Middle School
Title: The Patient & Psychiatrist
Category: Dramatic Script
Key: Silver Key
Educator: Kaneisha Hicks

The Patient & Psychiatrist

Characters-

Sarah/ Dr. Murray

Adan Anderson

Kaia/ Dr. Brian

Beck Finley

Scene 1

[This scene takes place under psych ward at the Love & Treat Hospital]

It was a usual Thursday afternoon. Dr. Sarah was sitting in her office drained and exhausted from listening to her patients. She was waiting for her next appointment with a new patient. All she could think of was her bed. She'd been awake since 4 A.M, surviving off 3 hours of sleep. As Dr. Sarah was dozing off, her coworker who is her best friend, Kaia A.K.A Dr. Brian, entered her office.

Kaia: Sarah!

Sarah: (Slowly puts her head up.) What?

Kaia: You know that you have a new patient, right?

Sarah: Oh my god! I forgot about it! When is he coming?

Kaia: (Sighs) Good news for you.

Sarah: Is he not coming?! (Excited Tone)

Kaia: He's in the waiting room.

Sarah: WHAT?!

Kaia: Good luck! (Winks)

Sarah: Where's the good news?

Kaia: Gosh Sarah, take a hint.

Sarah: You were being sarcastic, weren't you?

Kaia: All I can say is fix your hair, I'm about to allow him to come into the room.

Sarah: NO! This is my office. You can't just allow anyone to come.

Kaia: He's your patient.

Sarah: Still. It's my office.

Kaia: He's still going to come in.

Sarah: NO WAI-

Kaia: (Leaves the room to call the new patient)

Sarah: UGH!!! You're seriously on to something!

Scene 2

[This scene takes place in Sarah's office in the psych ward at the Love & Treat Hospital]

(Two Minutes Later)

Sarah: Just one more patient, then I get to go home and relax.

(Patient comes in)

Sarah: (Looks over at the door to see the patient) Hi- (Freezes when she sees Adan)

Adan: (Looks over at Sarah and freezes.)

Scene 3

[This scene takes place at Watford High School]

Sarah is in her senior year of High School. So is Adan. They both have known each other since their freshman year. Though they've been close friends, they get into a misunderstanding which causes them to not continue their friendship.

Sarah: (Waiting out in the courtyard for Adan)

(Adan comes outside, and looks for Sarah)

Sarah: Adan! I'm right here. (Waves at Adan)

Adan: Coming! (Runs towards Sarah)

Adan: (Stops when he reaches to where Sarah is standing)

Sarah: Hey Adan!

Adan: Hey! How was your day today?

Sarah: It's been good but tiring. I just can't wait to go home. (Sighs)

Adan: Yeah, I mean it's High School. But, at least it's the last year of it.

Sarah: Yep!

Adan: So you needed to tell me something, right?

Sarah: Yes! It's something I've been very nervous about. But you don't know. So here I go, shooting at you-

Adan: Actually...

Adan: I have to tell you something too.

Sarah: Oh. Sure, go ahead.

Adan: No, you can go first.

Sarah: No you go first! I'm eager to hear what you want it to say.

Adan: Uhhhhh....

Sarah: Go ahead.

Adan: I- So what I wanted to say was- I actually kind of-

Sarah: Are you okay?

(Kaia walks up to Sarah and Adan)

Adan: Uhhhh. I wanted to tell you that-

Kaia: Hey Sarah and Adan. (Interrupts Adan)

Sarah: Hey Kaia!

Adan: Hey Kaia.

Kaia: What were y'all talking about?

Sarah: Stuff.

Kaia: Oh my god, so interesting!

Sarah: I know right.

Kaia: Well you guys, I just saw y'all two together so I came here. So excuse me while I go to Taylor.

Adan: Alright, bye.

Sarah: Okay, Bye!!!

(Kaia walks away from Sarah and Adan)

Sarah: Okay so Adan, what were you saying?

Adan: Oh nothing. I guess I forgot.

Sarah: Oh.

Adan: Yeah. But, what were you saying?

Sarah: Oh yeah. I totally forgot about it. Okay, here I go shooting at you again!

Sarah: So remember we both applied and got into the same college?

Adan: Yep!

Sarah: Well...

Sarah: I also applied to Stanford knowing I didn't stand a chance. But guess what happened..... I GOT IN IT!

Adan: Oh....

Sarah: Surprising, isn't it?

Adan: Yes! But I'm so happy for you!

Sarah: I'm happy too, but also kind of sad. We won't get to go to the same college.

Adan: Don't worry. You'll find many people like me there. Probably people that are way better than me.

Sarah: No way! You're a pretty good friend. I doubt I'll find someone better than you.

Adan: Haha!

Scene 4

[This scene takes place in Sarah's office in the psych ward at the Love & Treat Hospital:
Continuation of scene 2]

Sarah and Adan have now met. Knowing that they were friends in high school, they're now in a doctor-patient relationship. Adan has to talk about his mental health to Sarah. Though, both are phased by what happened, Sarah tries to be professional.

Sarah: Hey, Mr. Anderson. Come and have a seat.

(Adan takes a sit)

Sarah: Uhhh... Okay, hi. What has brought you here today? (Sarah talks in a nervous manner)

Adan: Hi. How have you been?

Sarah: I've been great. But let's talk about you. (Talks to Adan while looking at the reports and papers.)

Adan: Oh, okay?

Sarah: Yeah, so how's life treating you?

Adan: I don't know.

Sarah: Okay. It's okay if you don't know. Many patients are like that.

Sarah: So, let's start our session. Are you ready?

Adan: Uhhh.....

Adan: I actually would like to leave. Is that fine?

Sarah: Unfortunately, since you already have this appointment set with me, you cannot leave right now. Our appointment will last for 30 minutes.

Adan: No, I would like to leave.

Sarah: Maybe by chance, am I making you uncomfortable?

Adan: Yes. Very much. Please just let me leave.

Sarah: We can talk it out. What may be making you uncomfortable, here, right now?

Adan: Do you not know? You really don't know?

Sarah: I really don't know.

Adan: Please. If you're going to act like you don't know me for the sake of being 'professional', I can't stay here.

Sarah: Okay Adan. I know you. What is making you uncomfortable?

Adan: The fact that I'm sitting here with you, and having to share my mental health. I think I've been embarrassed enough in front of you to be doing this again.

Sarah: I'm your doctor, right now. You're my patient. I'm not going to say anything that may remind you of the past with me.

Adan: You may not be able to say anything. But you definitely have thoughts, don't you. I know you already think that I'm miserable. Which I am. So I don't want to get into this .

Sarah: You've already done the survey. I've seen it all. I don't want to pressure you, but I feel like me being your doctor in this case is the best option for you. If not, we can find a different therapist for you. But don't leave this program because of me. You really need this therapy.

Adan: I just want to leave.

Sarah: I'm sorry, I cannot let you do that.

Adan: Ugh! What do you want me to do then?

Sarah: You have scheduled sessions with me already. If you want to continue having me as your therapist, then you don't have to do anything other than come to my 30 minute sessions every Tuesday and Thursday.

Sarah: But if you do not want me to assist you, then you may call the front desk, and ask them to change your therapist.

Adan: I'll stay. I guess that's the only option I have left.

Sarah: Okay.

Sarah: Let's start off by talking about your moods during the day.

(25 minutes later)

Sarah: Okay. Well, I guess that's the time. Thank you for cooperating with me. Do you have any questions?

Adan: I just want you to act like you know me.

Sarah: If that makes you more comfortable, I'll do that.

Adan: Thank you

Scene 5

[This scene takes place at Sarah's and Kaia's apartment]

Sarah: Kaia.

Kaia: What?

Sarah: Did you not realize who my last patient was?

Kaia: Who was it?

Sarah: It was Adan.

Kaia: Who's that?

Sarah: He was my friend in High School.

Kaia: Oh. The one that confessed to you and got beaten up by Beck?

Sarah: Yes.

Kaia: Poor guy. Why didn't you tell him that you had a boyfriend?

Sarah: I don't know. In fact, I didn't tell anyone that Beck was my boyfriend. Not even you.

Kaia: Yeah, but it still was partially your fault. He went through a lot because of Beck. Plus that Beck was a fraud.

Sarah: I know. I feel really guilty, but I don't know how to apologize, especially since so many years have passed.

Kaia: What did he say today when y'all met?

Sarah: He just wanted me to act like I know him. Which I found really strange. Why would he want me to bring up the past?

Kaia: Are you stupid?

Kaia: Do you really think that he can just go with the flow of y'all both acting like you guys don't even know each other after all that has happened?

Sarah: You're right.

Kaia: So what are you going to do now?

Sarah: I don't know. Should I apologize mid session?

Kaia: No.

Sarah: Then what do I do?

Kaia: Just wait till he opens up to you.

Sarah: Yeah.

Scene 6

[This scene takes place at Watford High School]

It's the last week of school. Sarah and her group are hanging out in the courtyard during break time. Adan finally picks some courage and tells Sarah what he's been meaning to tell her. It's his confession. He likes Sarah.

(Sarah and her friends are talking)

Adan: This is all or nothing. (Talks to himself)

Adan: (Walks up to Sarah)

Adan: Hey Sarah.

Sarah: Oh hey, Adan.

Adan: I have to tell you something

Sarah: Oh. Sure, go ahead.

Adan: I'm gonna get straight to the point.

Sarah: A- alright? (Stutters in confusion)

Adan: I really like you. I want us to stay in contact even when you leave for college. I've liked you since we first became friends but I never had the courage nor the confidence to tell you, though. But I really do like you.

Sarah: Uhhhh...

Beck: What the heck did you just say?

Adan: Huh? Who are you?

Beck: Did you seriously confess to my girlfriend? Especially, in front of me?

Adan: You?! You're her boyfriend?!

Beck: Yes, me!

Adan: Sarah? (Looks at Sarah in confusion since she never told him)

Beck: Why are you looking at her? Look at me!

Adan: I didn't know that you were her boyfriend. In fact, I didn't even know she was even dating anyone.

Beck: So what? You still confessed to her.

Adan: I'm sorry. Had I known that she was dating anyone, I wouldn't have confessed. I really genuinely apologize.

Beck: You're such a coward. Seriously? I can't believe you really decided to confess your feelings to her.

Beck: You're really in for some trouble now.

(Beck proceeds to beat up Adan in front of everyone)

Sarah: (Runs up to Beck) STOP IT BECK!

Beck: You better not plan something against me now.

Adan: (Glares at Beck and gets up to leaves)

Sarah: Beck! Why can't you ever control yourself?!

Beck: You saw what he did. You're really taking his side?!

Sarah: I'm not taking anybody's side. But what you did was very unnecessary!

Beck: Seriously?!

(Beck angrily leaves the place)

Scene 7

[This scene takes place in Sarah's office in the psych ward at the Love & Treat Hospital]

Sarah: Hey Adan!

Adan: Hi.

Sarah: Okay, so this is our first real session.

Adan: Okay.

Sarah: We will start off with basic questions and conversations.

Adan: Okay.

Sarah: So how are you feeling today?

Adan: I don't know.

Sarah: Oh, Okay.

Sarah: Is there anything you wanted to share with me?

Adan: I did.

Sarah: Go ahead.

Adan: I'm sorry.

Sarah: For what?

Adan: I shouldn't have confessed to you. I wasn't in my right mind at that time. So please do forgive me.

Sarah: Uhhh...

Sarah: Why are you apologizing? It was my fault for not telling you and not thinking about how you could've had feelings for me. But there is really no need for you to apologize.

Sarah: If anything, I should be the one to apologize. I'm really sorry. I shouldn't have not told you. I was very stupid at that time. I didn't know how to manage relationships or friendships. I made a mistake. I apologize.

Adan: (Stares at Sarah)

Sarah: And by the way, Beck was a jerk. He was way too impulsive. So Either way, I was going to break up with him.

Adan: Oh okay. But still, it was very wrong of me to do something like that.

Sarah: No worries! I never held a grudge. You've been forgiven.

Adan: Thank you for forgiving me.

Sarah: (Smiles at Adan) We really shouldn't be talking like this. So don't tell anyone that your doctor is talking to you like this. Haha!

Adan: Haha!

Adan: But there's still a problem.

Sarah: One second let me get a notebook. I've been told to write down everything you have a problem about.

Adan: Okay.

(Sarah gets her notebook)

Sarah: Okay. So what's the worry?

Adan: The problem is..... that I still like you.

(Sarah looks up to Adan with a shocked expression)

TO BE CONTINUED...

Student Name: Gerardo Diaz

Grade: 9

School: Kerr High School

Title: The Silent Battle

Category: Journalism

Key: Silver Key

Educator: Safraz Ali

What had seemed to be a little girl was not so little but on the inside, she was the greatest. She had a big heart, a large spirit for determination, an immense act of bravery, and who could forget an enormous dream. "What do you wish to be once you grow up?" was the universal question that lingered upon any child and the responses were far-reaching, but nothing out of the ordinary. Someone having the ambition to be a valorous police officer to shield their community or the sound of music just mellows you into wanting to become a musician! All these exhilarating careers displayed, however, this little girl didn't want any of those. This little girl gave the response that individuals would promptly respond with a side of an eye. This little girl wanted to join the military and she gazed at that dream as if a glittering shooting star had sprinkled upon her. Though childhood dreams aren't always accomplished, this wasn't just a childhood dream for her, this was THE dream. It was not typical, especially for girls but she thought about it, stuck to it, put the effort in, and in the fullness of time, did it. Nike's beaming neon shirts with the message "Just Do it" must've finally worked because, in June of 2018, she enlisted in the United States Army and was assigned at Fort Hood, Texas. Everything was going well, or at least that's how it appeared until April 22, 2020.

MISSING. What had begun as settled worries quickly dispersed into more and before you know it, soldiers were searching everywhere in the unit only to capture a devastated family with no response and disappointment. FOUND. On June 30, 2020, the missing soldier was found but not in the way that brought her home to her family. Bones and human remains were identified and buried along the Leon River. Somehow miserable brick walls had become even more despairing with murals of the individual to highlight her story, what she had gone through, and to never forget who she was.

#IAmVanessaGuillen. This was the story of Vanessa Guillen, a woman who accomplished the dream the little girl in her wanted despite the complications and the conventionalized perspective placed among women especially in a Hispanic household, just to be left with a brutal ending with no help. Prior to her disappearance, Vanessa reported two incidents where she was sexually assaulted but no further action was taken. The disheartening idea nevertheless is that she wasn't the first and she was not the only one. Across our country, those who are protecting it are not being sheltered themselves, and The American Legion reports on April 28, 2023, that there were 8,942 cases of sexual assault in 2022 by troops

and almost 7,400 of them reported that they had occurred during military service. The unfortunate murder of Vanessa not only sheds light upon her story but has allowed individuals to share their experiences and address the widespread problem of sexual misconduct in the military and ways we can further bring awareness towards it.

Research yields that sexual misconduct dates back to World War II as claimed by Veteran Affairs and as time progresses, it's essential to recognize the efforts of how courageous these troops have advanced to speak and report their situation but the critical difficulty with this is the fear of vocalizing sexual assault trauma is still present but even when they phonate it they're quickly suppressed and it is absurd that there even is a ubiquitous issue of sexual misconduct in the military first and foremost. Victims get little to no voice in these different matters due to sexist ideologies regarding both genders. Women, who are challenged every day in a male-dominated field, deeming to be too weak or too whiny — or males and the backlash they face when one simply states "I am a victim of sexual assault", responses divulging such as "suck it up" or "Take it like a man". Why are we championing a world that allows these cynical views to be continuously heard and why should we let it stay this way? The fact is that even if you disregard the ideologies society situates, the problems still override. CNN disputes that the military marks complaints about harassment as the lowest appropriate level and states they sweep aside these cases. The year Vanessa Guillen had gone missing, the Guillen family held vigils and protests on their own in which her family reports that they had conducted several searches without the help of the Fort Hood base and even some stories be told that the military was eminently hesitant to allow soldiers help search. Fort Hood failed her.

Corporation RAND states a few examples which can help decrease the long-lasting battle with these traumatizing experiences, the main idea being a workforce of professionals who will actively attempt to restrain and prevent activities of rape and sexual misconduct. Advocates are antecedently striving to back this idea up by developing ways of searching units and commands more effectively and hope to be taking a step in the right direction.

In spite of that, the answer to mitigate the silent war simply lies with noise. The voiceless must be given a voice and that doesn't come with simplicity. Though directly denoting criticism at the military is comprehensible enough, intervention is key and if we do not say anything then there isn't anything to be heard. Vanessa Guillen wasn't a case that magically gained recognition within the snap of a finger. On social media, her family and friends actively posted about her where more and more individuals accumulated in support. Those individuals didn't hear about this narrative as a result of possessing an instinct to know when someone went missing like Batman, no...they heard about Vanessa from a series of voices. Her family didn't allow themselves to be inaudible because that action would steer Vanessa from losing the silent battle. They fought, protested, and consistently brought forward flaws within Fort Hood every day for their daughter, sister, and friend to receive justice and that is exactly what happened. That didn't come about by

maintaining a seat and being stationery all day, her story was told by supporters standing. The only way to win the silent battle is to remain loud.

Those who enter the military expect to face threats such as guns and bombs by enemies on the opposing side, but instead, they're met physically, they're met with enemies on the same side and too much time has been allocated for these horrid situations to remain silent. If we utilize the data given to us by the American Legion where there were 8492 cases of sexual assault in the military in 2022, let us do the math. If there are 365 days in a year, then dividing 8492 by 365 gives us... about 25 cases per day or in other words every hour someone in the military reports a case of sexual assault. That is every hour that an innocent individual reports an incident where they have been traumatized, where they thought someone was their friend but wasn't. Every hour, it might just appear as one person who reported it, but it might be more suffering in the silent battle being left with no help.

Student Name: Eddy Ehigiator

Grade: 8

School: Alief Middle School

Title: True Happiness

Category: Short Story

Key: Silver Key

Educator: Brenda Peters

The poster that caught my eye said, "Happiness! Inside Glass Jars! Call Today!" It featured a phone number under the text. I came across it while walking home after a tiring day at work and snapped a quick photo, planning to show it to my wife later.

Upon reaching home, the usual routine took over. Dinner, household chores, packing snacks for our daughter, and tucking her into bed were the tasks of the evening. Each day seemed to blend into the next.

The following day, my curiosity about the poster led me to dial the phone number. A woman answered, and we arranged to meet in a public place. She claimed to have a glass jar filled with happiness.

I couldn't help but wonder how someone could offer happiness in a jar. Could it be real, or was it some sort of scam? Yet, my curiosity was too strong to resist, and I found myself waiting for her in a nearby park, my heart pounding with anticipation.

She arrived, a woman in her mid-thirties with a mysterious vibe about her. She introduced herself as Tia, and she carried a small, amusing glass jar in her hand. It wasn't similar to any jar I had ever seen having a clear and smooth surface, with a soft glow illuminating from within.

"I'm glad you could make it," she said, her eyes locking onto mine with an intensity that sent shivers down my spine. "Are you ready to experience true happiness?" I nodded, unable to break my gaze away from the jar. It held an unrealistic lure, as if the very essence of joy had become one within the jar.

Tia handed me the jar, and I excitedly accepted it, feeling an unbreakable connection to the strange object. It was cool to the surface, and I could sense a rhythm pulsing beneath the glass as if a heart was pumping with adrenaline. It was as if happiness itself were living in the jar.

I slowly unscrewed the lid. The moment the lid was lifted, a wave of pure, unbelievable amount of happiness washed over me. It was an overwhelming sensation, like being embraced by the warmest, most loving presence known to all of mankind.

My heart filled with joy, and tears of happiness formed in my eyes. I felt an insane weight lifting from my shoulders, and all the worries and stresses of life seemed to vanish. The colors around me became more vivid, and the sounds of the park: children's laughter, the rustling of leaves, the distant hum of traffic were all transformed into a song of perfection.

Tia watched with a smile as I continued living in the moment. "That's the power of the jar," she said. "It contains pure, untainted happiness, and you may keep it." I couldn't believe what I was experiencing. It was as if I had been searching for this feeling my whole life, and now it was here, in the palm of my hand. I knew that I had to take this jar home and share it with my wife and daughter. It was a gift that could change our lives forever. As I left the park, Tia's words echoed in my mind. "Guard the jar with your life," she had cautioned. "Happiness like this is rare and precious. It can bring absolute joy, but it must also be treated with care."

Back home, I couldn't contain my excitement. I burst through the front door, bragging about the glass jar like it was treasure. My wife, Sarah, and our daughter, Lily, looked up from their activities, their expressions a mix of curiosity and amusement.

"Guess what I've got?" I exclaimed, unable to hide the excitement in my voice.

Sarah raised an eyebrow. "What's that, dear?" "It's happiness in a jar!" I said, unscrewing the lid and releasing a burst of the enchanting happiness into our living room.

The effect was instant. Sarah's eyes widened, and a radiant smile spread across her face. Lily, who had been playing with her toys, let out a spill of contagious laughter that filled the room. I watched in awe as the jar's magic worked its spell on my family.

We spent the evening examining the jar's glow, sharing stories, and experiencing the newfound joy that had entered our lives. The worries of the world seemed distant and insignificant as we cherished this extraordinary gift.

Days turned into weeks, and the jar became an essential part of our lives. We would open it in the morning, allowing its happiness to transform our day with positive energy. It made the ordinary moments extraordinary, and the challenges of life seemed less frightening.

However, as time passed, I couldn't help but notice the changes that were taking place. The more time spent in the jar's happiness, the more we began to distance ourselves from the world outside. Our friends and family, once the center of our lives, were gradually forgotten. We became invested in our own dream of joy, shutting out the concerns and responsibilities that had once straightened us.

One evening, as I watched Lily playing, I realized that her giggles and laughter were gone, or rather not genuine. It was as if the jar's happiness had replaced the genuine joy that had once filled our home. I glanced at Sarah and her eyes also held a distant look as if her soul had become disconnected from reality.

It was at that moment when a thought of doubt began to bubble up within me. Could this happiness be too good to be true? What were we sacrificing in exchange for this infinite "happiness"? The answers were vague, and I couldn't find any information about the jar's origin or its long-term effects.

Determined to find the truth, I attempted to contact Tia, but my calls and messages never went through. It was as if she had vanished, leaving us alone with the strange jar.

As time went on, the jar's influence over our lives grew stronger. We stopped going to work, resigning from our jobs and the outside world. Our social connections withered away and our house that was once a warm and vivid home grew silent and dull.

One day, I entered our living room to find Sarah and Lily sitting motionless. Their eyes emptied over as they stared into the jar. They no longer acknowledged my presence, leaving their fascination with the jar as it was consuming their thoughts and emotions.

I grew desperate, and I knew that I had to break free from the jar's clutches. I couldn't allow it to take everything from us: our identities, our memories, our very lives. But every time I tried to stop it, I was met with resistance from Sarah and Lily and their obsession with the jar.

My struggle to regain control of our lives was a constant battle, and the house became a battleground of wits. It pained me to see the people I loved most so much yet manipulated by the jar's "happiness."

As I grew more isolated, my world became darker than it ever was. I had lost touch with the person I once was, the person who had loved and cherished the genuine moments of life. The jar had promised happiness, but in return, I had sacrificed every last bit of my humanity.

In my darkest hour, when it seemed like all hope was lost, I received a message from an unknown number. The text was brief and blunt, providing a single instruction: "Break the jar."

With a mix of anger, fear, and determination, I clutched the jar in my trembling hands. I knew that the message was my only hope, the last chance to save my family and myself. The jar HAD to be destroyed with its contents shattered so that we could reclaim our lives.

I took a deep breath and threw the jar against the floor, shattering it into a thousand fragments. As it broke, a blinding light formed, and a wave of emotions—joy, sorrow, nostalgia, and fear—engulfed me.

When the light finally dimmed, I woke up in a place that was unfamiliar. The room was cold and gloomy, lacking any personal presence. I felt disoriented and isolated, as if I had been erased from my own existence and thrown into a parallel universe.

Panic flowed through me as I realized that I was no longer in the world I knew. My phone, which had become my connection to the past, had been wiped clean of contacts, messages, and photos. It was a blank slate, no traces of my former life. My family, my friends, and the moments that had once excited me were gone, erased by an invisible force that had taken hold of my existence.

I was a stranger in a strange land, disconnected from the very thought of who I was. Each day became a journey into the mysterious unknown, as I traveled a world that was simultaneously familiar and foreign. I wished to find my way back to the life I had lost, but it seemed like an impossible dream. I then felt something in my pocket, it was the jar that I shattered only moments ago.

Then, a mysterious text message instructed me to break the jar once again. Driven by a mix of anger and despair, I shattered it, unleashing a blinding light and a new sense of emotions. It was as if I had been reborn, emerging from the depths of darkness into the warm feeling of the sun.

When I woke up, I found myself in my own bed, surrounded by my family. I felt an appreciation for the life I had almost lost. Then out of the blue, I received another text message from Tia saying: "Let me know if you need another jar :)" It became clear that genuine happiness was in the moments and the people I had taken for granted.

Sarah's smile was a beacon of love, and I couldn't stop gazing at her, grateful for her in my life. Lily's laughter filled the air, and I held her close, cherishing the sound like a precious song. Yesterday I may have found that annoying. Yesterday, I may have found a lot of things annoying, irritating, or wasteful. But not today. Today, I pulled her under the covers between me and Sarah.

Today was going to be a good day. Today, I was happy.

Student Name: Steven Tran
 Grade: 8
 School: Albright Middle School
 Title: Union
 Category: Poetry
 Key: Silver Key
 Educator: Megan Kelly

Her streaming bridal dress, His stoic tuxedo,
 Visage covered in a nebulous veil, Neckties choking his collar,
 Powdered with makeup, Bronzen skin,
 Into a porcelain doll, Like a clean statue,
 Her sharp, vermilion lips, Suit cut as if freshly picked,
 Converse to her now pale skin, Redress all past doubts,
 Gloved hands clasped, Hands placed around her waist,
 Around a corsage of blossoms, Over hand-woven threads,
 Ribbons of spring buds, A straightened tie,
 Woven into her hair, Completes his look,
 Her plumes of delicate pinafore, A sharp cologne ties his certainty,
 Devotion lies in her eyes, Devotion lies in his eyes,

Until Until
 Death Death
 Do Do
 Us Us
 Part

Through faded photographs,
 I see their day of joy,
 Wishing I could have been there,
 To see, to smell, to touch, to hear, to taste,
 Now skin weathered and tired,
 The reality has set in,

In
 Good Good
 Times Times
 And And
 In In

Student Name: Riel Castillo

Grade: 8

School: Albright Middle School

Title: Valentine's for one Misfortunate Child

Category: Novel Writing

Key: Silver Key

Educator: Megan Kelly

As I stared out to the beautiful orange sky; I saw the sun slowly descend into the horizon. Soon the end of the day would come, along with my life. As the bright star continued to lower, my heart rate increased. Sweat raced down my face and back (which honestly felt really gross, but...that doesn't really matter now). I held it together though, for the sake of my longest friend sitting right next me on this deserted cliffside bench. So me and Bonnie just waited, in silence, listening to the crashing waves below. Then it came, like an unexpected plot twist. Freezing cold, bites of pain ran all over my body! After, came the unnatural violet fog, with sparks of red, closing in my field of vision. Bonnie and I turned our heads, and the last thing I saw were the two miniscule blue lights that made up death's eyes...

When I awoke I didn't see the expected cave-like area of Hades' Dimension, instead I was falling. So I started screaming my head off, duh. Falling nebulously down a tunnel, that looked ...weird, to say the least. Detailed images of...stuff, I guess, lined the walls, all bleeding together into a colossal mess of a mural. That's when I finally saw my limbs...or lack thereof. My screaming only intensified. After the screaming ceased, I took a closer look at the walls. One picture was of a young child getting his 4th birthday cake dropped on his head, another was about the same child falling head first, off his bike into a concrete curb. These felt ...familiar somehow, but I just couldn't quite place it. It was only when I saw the image showing the child again, this time a little older, sitting next to a crying girl. Wearing a bright pink jacket. Bonnie. Memories...memories, these were my memories! Every single one of them. My life was literally flashing before my eyes. I wanted to close them though, viewing all my memories from an outside perspective...was difficult. I saw good moments, or what little of them I had. More than that though, the bad. Images of all the misfortunate PAIN. What I went through when I was really young, the bullying, the illnesses, the injuries, the embarrassment, anxiety, everything. I relived it all. Worst of all...the Holter monitor. My descent seemed to slow as I focused on this particular event. I watched as the thin emerald line got less and less excited about coming back up again; following the chest of the man laying on the hospital bed next to it. Doctors swarmed him doing everything they could, shocking his heart multiple times over. And yet, despite the incredible effort...the screen flat lined. The man's

heart stopped beating. My dad's heart. A tight knot of despair formed in my stomach. The same fate was most awaiting me at the end of this pit, I knew it. As I fell, I ignored my surroundings, pained from the flashback. I couldn't help it though, and still caught a few glimpses of more recent memories. This time though, they seemed to be singing to a different tune. Sure there were classic injuries, for example, when someone broke my arm using a basketball (don't ask). There was something more to it too though. I really concentrated on one more memory. It was of the house kitchen, except I was seeing it from the tiny crack of the hallway door that was supposed to be closed. There, sobbing, uncontrollably was my mother only a few days after her husband's passing. Then I remembered what I had thought at that moment. I hate this! I don't want to see mommy sad, please I don't want to see mommy sad. I don't want to see anyone cry. I don't want to see anyone sad...

The knot untied as a mysterious wave of energy flowed through my body (wherever it was). And a resolve started to become. My strength only continued to grow as more memories passed. Such as: being the only one to attend a long time bullie's birthday party, saving cats from trees, standing up against my little brother's meanest teacher, walking across schools to deliver a lost laptop, always volunteering at the 'people in need' center on Sundays. And now recently saving and accompanying Mary, vowing to give the boy in the cafeteria my lunch for the rest of the year, calming the girl at the grocery store. And not confessing to Rachel; helping her overcome her grief, for her dead brother. One final memory came to mind. The same one from earlier of me sitting by a crying Bonnie. She was so, so, so lonely. Even though everyone at school and in the neighborhood held her on such a high pedestal for her incredible luck and talent. No one knew, but sitting on that pedestal, made her completely cut off from the world. So I, somehow, was the first to notice this, when I saw her balling her eyes out. Even though our situations were worlds apart. Me cursed by death to misfortunate. She, blessed with skill and luck. I still reached out and became her best friend. Determination completely takes over me, and a ghostly apparition of my body appears. I use this, and stick myself to the walls of the pit. When I realized my challenge, a great invisible force was pushing down on me this entire time, I had just never noticed, just going to the flow. I held my position though, not for a second slipping down into the (probably) underworld. Then I fight against it, slowly I pull one hand up, then a leg, one hand, then another leg. It was hard work, and it felt like I was trying to wade my way through a hurricane, tsunami, and tornado all at the same time. Only three times worse. Despite this, my will is steel, and against what I thought my ghostly hands could do, I finally made it to the top, when a flash of white burst out...

When I reawakened (AGAIN), I found my spirit form (or whatever it was) still, thankfully, not resting in pieces. The space around me though was completely black. Pure nothingness, in every direction. The only light emanated from my own 13-year-old-soul-body. Even then it was still dim. I walked, felt, smelt, and listened around. Nothing, just as

advertised. I explored the area for what felt like a few minutes, when I saw off into the far distance, another low white light. Having literally no better options, I make my way over to it. As I ventured nearer, and nearer, it became apparent what it was. It was a ghost-person just like me. He wore professional khaki pants, held up by a handsome leather belt. This made him seem proper and mature, however, his top told a different story. He wore a simple white-cloth shirt, and a humble watch on his wrist. All topped off with a sombrero hiding his eyes. As got only a foot or two away from him, he raised his hat to show his loving hazel eyes. Dad?! I recoiled from the apparition, not believing it could honestly be him! Couldn't it? I guess this was my second time walking the line between life and death. Was this so hard to believe? Still though, after all this time, grieving, mourning, crying...

"Hi Aron, you...you doing ok?" father tentatively asks.

"Well I'm not as dead as I could be, I guess? So ok...maybe?" I responded. He just chuckles at this.

"Don't worry I'm not here, just at random, I'm here to help you get back to the living world, if that's truly what you want. So is it?" he asks.

"Of course that's what I really want-"

"Then why? Why do you want to go back?! You know yourself, the longer you live, the longer the grand council will continually mess with you, so why?" he asks earnestly. The bluntness makes me move back even more, but that doesn't stop him from continuing.

"Cause if you don't go up there prepared with an answer, and confront death. You'll just end up in that tunnel again. And there's no guarantee you'll fight your way back here again," he finishes. This leaves me in complete disbelief. Did my dad just come back from the grave to tell me that going down with him was an option? No, no, no. I knew my dad, and there was no way he would. So what did he ask?...

He asked me why I needed to go back. To explain myself. I need to give a solid reason. I rack my phantom brain for the answer, when I realize the answer stands in front of me. I take a good long look at my father, remembering the hospital, and how he took his final breath.

"Dad, I'm going to live, I'm going to come back because... because I strive to see everyone smile...at least once," I say daringly to him, inches from his face. Then he just takes me in his arms, and he kneels down, embracing me.

"Good, now come on we need to get you up there" dad says. We? Immediately this dark mass illuminates with bright light, as specters appear. I recognized some, only barely though. Their eyes really told me; these were my family, some matching my father's eyes, others matching my mom's emerald green. Then there was still the other set of people, I didn't know who they were. Taking a good stare into a teenage looking-specter told me

their identity. He shared the same eyes as his sister, Rachel. His family standing behind him. There were so, so many, one family seemed to even seemed to be related to Ms. Mary's husband, from how she described him. Were they all here for me?

"Here we go," my dad says, cupping both hands on the floor ready to boost me up.

"B-b-but" I stammer out.

"Don't worry we're all here to help you. Oh and remember. You're my son, and I'll always watch over you in pride and love. Along with your mom, and brothers," he says sincerely. This almost brings me to tears, but I hold myself together, and take a step on his hand. I consider what to do from there, when other spirits climb atop him into another 'boosting position', and lift me further. Then again, and again, and again. Until finally, I reach a miniscule white spot in the middle of darkness. There and then I somehow knew what to do, I grabbed the edges of the hole with my fingers and strenuously stretched the spot wide open enough for my body. I look down, incredibly thankful yet shocked at my ghostly assistants, smiling toward them. They all smile back, and I lean into the portal...

My eyes flutter (FOR THE THIRD TIME NOW) tooooo ... an amazingly sharp edge centimeters from my forehead. I'm overcome with fear again, when I push down, knowing there was room for it in what I was about to pull. The blade in front of me was a metal scythe, with a lengthy wooden handle. Wielded by the grim reaper himself, dressed in a solid black suit, appropriate for a funeral; wearing an expression of shock, disbelief, and confusion all on his skull face. His purple fog, pushed back in surprise as well. This wasn't his doing, something was keeping him from implanting the weapon into me. I blink trying to understand the situation, when I see what must've been fifty phantom hands, extending from nowhere, stopping the blade in its tracks. Bonnie just stood near the edge of the cliff, completely paralyzed and whiter than the ghosts. Despite everything, I push forward with my goal. Gently I take the tip of the scythe, and caaaarefully lower it to the ground; Mr. Death responded by moving the other end of the weapon to the ground as well, standing up tall again, overbearing me. With an official look of terrifying intimidation. After talking to him once every year, though, I can see through this mask. And I find an expression of expectation, as if waiting for an explanation of everything that had just happened to me. In response I just shrug, fainting confidence, when there was truly none. And I begin the most important and heartfelt speech of my life.

"Ever since birth you, and the council cursed me with absolute misfortune. Constant. Never Ending. Haunting me every single day of my life" I started, a little bit of anxiety cracking into my voice, still I persisted.

"In that time you couldn't even IMAGINE the things I went through. Anxiety, embarrassment, physical pain, hunger, a desire for more, the bullying, teasing, the isolation. The feeling of failure, letting those down I care about most, heart ache, and

break. I EVEN DIED! But most of all ...the feeling after losing...losing one of the people you love...love more than anything. I've gone through it...even at my age of 13...I've experienced it all."

"So imagine all that, yet never ceasing. That is my everyday, there was, nor ever will be a perfect day for me." I say sadness overtaking my voice.

"Sometimes...you know...I'll even try to search for it. I'll try my best to work at something, anything! Anything I could be passionate about. Anything I could accomplish to make my life a tiny bit...more meaningful. Nothing, my luck gets in the way every-single-time."

"Worst of all, I know why, why all of this is happening to me, just because the grand council and the rest of your little underground party decided it so..." I say, failing to be neutral.

"And admittedly I can feel despair, anger, bitterness, because WHY DID IT HAVE TO BE ME, RIGHT?! WHY DID I HAVE TO LOSE MY DAD?! WHY DID I HAVE TO SEE MY MOM CRY!? WHY DO I HAVE TO BE THE ONE TO SUFFER BECAUSE YOU GUYS WANT IT TO BE?!" I scream out in rage, knowing it had to be said, but hating it.

"Most of the time though? Those thoughts never even cross my head," I say, taking a deep breath.

"Cause every day I see people just-like-me. For whatever reason they suffer just like me. It can be of heartbreak, injuries, loss...whatever. And I can never just ignore it. I feel all their emotions deep down into my very core. I know what it feels like to live their situation, all the pain that comes with it." I say in a monotone voice.

"I hate it, I hate knowing that people are in the same awful despair I find myself in."

"And you want to know the weirdest part? Despite me. Despite the curse. I can still feel happy, in no part thanks to me. But thanks to my friends..." I say, looking over to Bonnie.

"And because of my amazing family. My mom, and my brothers."

"So I know, even if my perfect day will never come, I can still love and feel happiness. So if I can? Then I'm sure everyone can. YOU WANT TO KNOW WHY I WANT TO LIVE RIGHT?!" I continue in furious passion.

"THEN HERE'S MY REASON. The reason I worked out of your grasp. So I can help. So I help, help anyone I find in despair. As, if there's even a chance, like I KNOW THERE IS. I want to see them smile again. I want to guide everyone I see to their perfect day, so they never don't have to continue crying!" I yell out in even brighter passion.

He just stared, terrifyingly, just taking it in. As if contemplating everything I'd just confessed. Slowly he lowered himself into a crouch, not taking his eyes off me, aloofly grabbing his scythe with his right hand. The second realized I failed, he instantaneously

swung his weapon upward, bisecting me. Agony didn't come through, instead a brief flash of black came over me; it was as if a huge weight had just come off me.

"Wha-what?" I managed, taking time to make sure my non-ghost body was okay.

"Aron Astrell, you failed your original 8 virtues. However, you have convinced me your worth to live is sure. And now I've freed you from your curse, misfortunate. Me, or the council, won't bother you again, until your true time has come. Good-bye." death said not a wink of emotion in his voice. I, again, am able to see through this facade, and I read what was maybe respect and contempt. Contempt I wouldn't be going with him today.

"The council won't be happy about this," I say, finally, knowing this would hurt his reputation in his own domain. I couldn't help but feeling guilt for him

"You should've thought about that when you started your little address," he said, emotionless, but with the slightest of winks. That said he trudged into his cloud of amethyst, snapped his fingers. A tornado speedily formed around him, and with a puff, he was gone.

Immediately I collapsed to my knees, fully taking in everything I had just experienced, walking the line of life and death, and somehow convincing death not to kill me. How?! At that moment Bonnie slammed into an embrace with me on the ground. As both our emotions overcame us, we started weeping in unison. It felt like hours when we finally stopped, slowly we helped each other up, and walked ourselves to our neighborhood in relative silence. I insisted we go to her house first, but she forced me to mine and said...

"Thanks for being my friend," with a tight smile and another hug. Then I just walked into my house, gathered my mom, and brothers immediately embracing them tightly as well. Dad no doubt watched over us. The next morning, I saw the sun rise once more.

Student Name: Emma Ngo

Grade: 8

School: Albright Middle School

Title: Watch Your Class: How the Patriarchy Benefits and Corrupts off of the Lower Income Class

Category: Critical Essay

Key: Silver Key

Educator: Megan Kelly

The way mankind has gone above and beyond to solidify one's own superiority and power is through the development of the social class hierarchy. One's own label to state your placement in society, therefore dividing the positive, negative, wealthy, poor, and the rich. It is something conditioned that every individual should know their place in this world, and know everyone else's. Every person has heard these terms and murmurs before, "Is this person financially comfortable?" "Are you middle class, lower class, or upper class?" It is a natural occurrence to ask, to know, and to say, and it is modern human nature to always choose the best option that will give us the best advantages and benefits, leaving our patriarchal system to benefit and corrupt the lower-income class.

The patriarchal system, deeply entrenched in societal structures, not only perpetuates systemic inequality but also exploits the lower-income class for its own benefit. The historical development of patriarchy is related to the evolution of societal structures and economic systems. As societies progressed, power became the motive, with men predominantly occupying influential roles. The unequal distribution of power built the foundation for the patriarchal system, reinforcing traditional gender roles and degrading women to inferior positions. The intertwining of patriarchy with economic structures solidified the exploitation of the lower-income class, as economic power became a tool to perpetuate and escalate a gender-based imbalance.

To grasp the historical impact on the lower-income class, one needs only look at the corrupted social structures that emerged. In agrarian societies, for instance, men dominated land ownership and agricultural production, while women's labor, often unpaid, was crucial to societal traditions and culture. As societies transitioned to industrialization, the gendered division of labor persisted, with women relegated to low-paying, lowly jobs. This historical pattern underscores the systematic exploitation of the lower-income class, particularly women, as they faced economic hardships that were increased by patriarchal norms.

The patriarchal system exerts corrupting forces through gendered power dynamics, reproductive rights control, wage gaps, and a lack of representation. Gendered power dynamics ensure that decision-making processes in economic and social spheres remain

skewed, perpetuating inequality. Evidence from numerous studies, including the World Economic Forum's Global Gender Gap Report 2022, highlights the persistent gender inconsistency in leadership positions and decision-making roles globally, reflecting the deeply ingrained nature of these power imbalances.

Wage gaps and occupational segregation contribute significantly to the exploitation of the lower-income class; women, especially those in lower-income brackets, face gender-based wage variations, restricting their economic mobility. Occupational segregation further limits access to high-paying jobs, relegating women to sectors with limited financial prospects. The lack of representation in leadership positions exacerbates these issues, as policies and resource allocation decisions are made without adequate consideration of the needs of the lower-income class.

In conclusion, the patriarchal system, deeply rooted in history, continues to exert corrupting forces that disproportionately affect the lower-income class, especially directed toward the women demographic. The historical development of patriarchy and its intersection with economic structures have perpetuated a cycle of exploitation, marginalization, and limited opportunities for those at the socio-economic margins. Evidence from global reports and academic research highlights the varied ways in which the patriarchy maintains its own power, ensuring the continued subjugation of the lower-income class. While addressing this systemic issue, it is imperative to challenge and dismantle the patriarchal norms that perpetuate inequality, advocating for policies that promote gender equity and economic justice. Only through comprehensive societal changes can develop justice to create a future where the lower-income class is liberated from the shackles of patriarchal oppression. The time has come to leave the burden of cruelty, unfurl the banner of equality, and forge a fate where the promise of a just society is not just an aspiration but an indomitable reality.

Student Name: Ephraim Nwabuko

Grade: 8

School: Albright Middle School

Title: Water Wars

Category: Humor

Key: Silver Key

Educator: Megan Kelly

Chapter 1

Emperor Swimicus Floatalitie sits on his throne uneasy. His enemy, the Submerged Kingdom, is working hard for the games. He can't lose another Water Wars, or else his whole kingdom would be swimming with the sharks. In other words, consumed by The Sizzling Waters! Emperor Swimicus looks to the pool where his recruits train.

"Sloppy...very sloppy! Kick your feet! Float! Not sink! Keep your arms straight, not flailing! At this rate, we'll lose the games again!" Swimicus says to himself.

THE WATER WARS ARE LIKE YOUR OLYMPICS OR WORLD CUP. EVERY YEAR, EACH OF THE 50 EMPIRES AND KINGDOMS OF WATER MEETS IN THE HIGH-DIVE, THE PLACE WHERE THE TOURNAMENT TAKES PLACE, AND DISPLAYS THEIR KNOWLEDGE OF THE SACRED ART OF SWIMMING. IF A NATION WERE TO LOSE 10 WATER WARS IN A ROW, THEIR ENTIRE KINGDOM WOULD BE SUBMERGED IN A BOILING CATASTROPHE CALLED THE SIZZLING WATERS.

"Glidillious Paddleron, how much time do we have until the tournament?" Emperor Swimicus asked hastily.

"We currently have two weeks and five hours until the 555th Water Wars, Your Majesty, Glidillious responded.

"Is that enough time?" Swimicus asked.

"If I may, your eminence, for the past 9 Water Wars, we've procrastinated and failed; we fell below the Top Five places. If we lose this tournament, the Lord of the Tides will wipe our kingdom out with the Sizzling Waters." He said.

"I understand our problem Glidillious but with the performance of these recruits, the entire kingdom is looking at becoming fish food. No emperor has ever had to do this in 400 years, but my hand has been pushed. We need outer reinforcements...call in Freestyle."

Glidillious rushes out of the room as the Emperor cringes at the sight of his empire's final hopes.

1 WEEK AND 6 DAYS

STARTING IN FREESTYLE HOME

The Royal Lifeguards surround the room. Glidillious steps forward.

"All bow before Emperor Swimicus Floatallite!" He announces.

Emperor Swimicus comes forward while adjusting his crown crafted from the finest diving rings. Inside the room, Freestyle sits on a chair.

" 'Clap, Clap' Bravo everyone. What did I do this time, so much so that the Emperor of Splash Empire has to come to my abode?"

"Mr. Freestyle, I know of your malfeasance against the empire but I am giving you a chance to be... exonerated." Swimicus offered.

"Well, your omnipotence, your condescending offer seems too magnanimous," Freestyle mocked the emperor's grammar. "What's the catch?" He asked.

"No catch, just do one small favor for me and consider it all overlooked," Swimicus said.

Freestyle walked out of the room and out into the daylight. He looked to the sky.

"I don't want my deeds to be overlooked or exonerated. I used to be the great Freestyle, with my swim school that taught our young minds to uphold our nation's great name. But, ever since the war with the Submerged Kingdom and my school destroyed, I've become nothing. A bandaid drifting in the water, gross and unwanted. If I were to fulfill your request, please rebuild my school. Let me have a purpose again." Freestyle said.

Emperor Swimicus walks up to him and puts his hand on his shoulder.

"Your wish shall be granted, wipe the chlorine from your eyes. You will be our great savior!"

"Thank you, Emperor. What is the task?" Freestyle asks.

The Emperor smiles. He takes Freestyle back to the Recruit Swim Training Center.

"Bend your knees, put your goggles on! Hold your breath, don't drink the pool water! Ugh! How will these people ever learn?" Freestyle rants.

Glidillious walks up to him and hands him a towel, goggles, and flip-flops.

"You will teach them." Emperor Swimicus emerges from the shadows with a new towel robe and golden flip-flops.

"This year's Water Wars is a crucial one. If the people through this glass lose this year, The Lord of the Tides will drown the Splash Empire in the Sizzling Waters. With you and your great swimming techniques, you will save us all." Swimicus said.

"These guppies need to be whipped into shape. I accept. I will train them." Freestyle said.

"Fantastic. My assistant Glidillious and I will supervise here. We're counting on you. We very much are."

Chapter 2

Freestyle walks through the door as the recruits look at him.

"Hello everyone! Stop your drowning for a moment! I am Mr. Freestyle, the greatest Swimming Coach in all of the Splash Empire and your new teacher. All swim teachers leave immediately. You will all become great swimmers after your time with me. Let's get ready to paddle!"

"Tell me your name and swimming experience," Freestyle asks one recruit.

"My name is Aquana Drainage and I have been swimming all my life. My family was thrilled when the Emperor drafted me."

He continued to go around.

"My name is Wade Riparian and I have been surrounded by swimming but have never swum in my life. I hope that I will learn a lot and contribute to a victory in the 555th Water Wars."

"I hope so too. You're drifting apart but don't worry I'll pull you back together." Freestyle added.

He continued to move around the pool.

"I'm H-Two O. Monsoon and I'm great at swimming. My mother works for the empire, so I always get the best instructors. Experience doesn't matter if you have money."

"It does Ms. Monsoon. It'll matter even more once you see the tsunami of the Sizzling Waters outside your home." Freestyle said.

"Okay everyone, all 20 of you have to put on a good show in 1 week and 6 days. We have no time to waste. Let us begin with our first lesson."

1 WEEK AND 4 DAYS

"Good work today everyone, but we aren't done yet. Yesterday we learned how to do freestyle with a float and everyone did poorly. We ran out of time yesterday so, I'll show you how it's done now. Without the float." Freestyle said.

Emperor Swimicus and his assistant Glidillious watch through the glass.

"My liege, Freestyle, is trying hard for his recruits. We might not look at boiling destruction this year!" Glidillious said.

Suddenly an unexpected guest showed up in the room. Emperor Swimicus was furious.

"King Geysers of the Submerge! To what do we owe this honor?" Glidillious respectfully said.

"Must be an attribute in this realm, so prompt to reach the summary. Sit down young man, I haven't time for you." King Geysers said.

"So Emperor Floatallite, how's the Water Wars preparations? Are these your recruits here through the glass? How pathetic." King Geysers said.

Emperor Floatallite stood up quickly to face King Geysers. Royal Lifeguards from the Submerged Kingdom and Splash Empire both stood next to their respective leaders.

"Prepare to lose the Water Wars. We here in the Splash Empire don't quit and call treaties, unlike the Submerge." Emperor Swimicus said referencing the war they had eighteen years ago.

"Is that a challenge, Emperor Swimicus Floatallite of Splash Empire?" King Geyser asked.

Emperor Swimicus laughed.

"No, no, King Canal Geysers of the Submerged Kingdom. It's a promise." Swimicus said.

He sat back down on his chair. King Geysers signaled the guards to begin leaving the room.

"See you at the games, Swimicus." King Geyser said as he departed.

"That man is so aggravating. We can't let the Submerged Kingdom win the Water Wars. We just cannot." Emperor Floatallite said as he slammed his hand on his chair handle.

"Calm down, your illustriousness, Freestyle knows what he is doing. We will win this year. If we make it somewhere in the top 5, we are safe from destruction." Glidillious said.

1 WEEK AND 2 DAYS

"Keep your stomach above water and toes splashing like a spinning...I mean...a kicking turbine. Aquana and Recruit Plunge get in the deep end. Recruit Flood and Recruit Gully don't let go. H-Two O, stop adjusting your expensive swim goggles and get diving! We only have a week and 2 days! I know we can do this!" Freestyle commands.

"He's really taken control these past four days, sire," Glidillious says.

"He certainly has. I have seen them turn from a drowning mess to great swimmers. Thanks to Freestyle. But I still think they have a lot to learn." Swimicus responses.

"You're right, my lord, shall I test them?" Glidillious said.

"Yes, you shall."

"Very well, sire." Glidillious obeys.

Glidillious enters the pool room in swimwear.

Student Name: Isabella Le

Grade: 11

School: Kerr High School

Title: What's my worth?

Category: Humor

Key: Silver Key

Educator: Ayn Nys

As I sit here, floating in the vast expanse of the universe, I can't help but chuckle at the sudden surge of concern human inhabitants are showing for me. It's quite the turnaround, to be frank. It's not every day that a planet gets showered with so much unexpected affection. I suppose I've become the latest trend, the hot topic of the universe. But fret not, dear humans, I've been around for quite a while, and your antics are not entirely new to me. Let's take a stroll down memory lane, shall we? Ice ages, volcanic eruptions—oh, the drama! It seems I've had my fair share of mood swings long before your species came into the picture. Millennia of change, and yet you all seem genuinely surprised by my tendency to switch it up every now and then. It's almost endearing, really.

However, do you want to know something that's not endearing? The human need for their everyday life appliances. These inventions are quite something. Take air conditioning or whatever you freeloaders call it, A/C? The air conditioning machine has managed to recreate a gentle breeze within your walls while ignoring the grand wind that I've been conducting for a millennium. How adorable! Little do you realize that while you're busy cooling your homes, you're heating up my atmosphere. It's like watching a child put a band-aid on a broken dam. Additionally, let's not forget your fondness for deforestation. You're so committed to "fixing" things that you're practically rearranging my furniture without asking. You clear my forests, claiming it's for your progress, but I can guarantee you that it's progressing you straight into a whirlpool of danger. Now I ask you to sit, breathe, and think. Are those little creatures who have lost their homes, families, and friends worthless? Have I not given you all that you would need to live? Why must you fix what is not broken? Am I worthless?

I've seen it all, from my vantage—your fleeting trends change like the seasons. Unlike my timeless cycles of transformation, your interests seem to alter every time my axial tilt points me in a new direction. One moment avocado toast was all the rage, and then it was the switch from skinny jeans to wide-legged pants. While I remain steadfast in my cycle of changing seasons, you humans change your minds as often as you change your clothes. You may wonder why anything you do affects me. Ah, those one-time-use materials, my dear inhabitants. They're like shooting stars that dazzle with their convenience but leave a trail of havoc. These creations, meant to cater to your immediate

desires, fail to see the bigger picture—the intricate life that thrives around you. The resources poured into their production, often extracted with no regard for my delicate balance, scar my landscapes and disrupt my harmonious rhythms. And the waste they generate, oh, the mountains of discarded plastic and debris, they clutter my oceans and soils, suffocating the very essence of life that I've nurtured for eons. I've asked you to sit, breathe, and think, but now I ask for you to feel. Think from my perspective, a planet that keeps giving and giving. I hope this brightens your perspective.

Now while we're on the topic of brightening, let us address the elephant in the room—or should I say the Sun. Ah, the Sun, my fiery little ball of energy. Our relationship is like a complicated romance. You see, maintaining the perfect temperature is quite the challenge when your partner has mood swings that involve solar flares and sunspots. It's a never-ending dance of equilibrium, and I must say, I was quite the graceful partner if I do say so myself. Although, there is only so much I can take and it's not like I didn't try to save our love for each other. Just because she's the one with blazing hot rays, doesn't mean I can't get heated in an argument either! Why must I always remain calm like the water? Whatever. Aside from the personal issues that conflicted in the argument, there was also a major factor contributing to our separation: the broken ozone layer. After the ozone layer broke, I found it beyond upsetting to communicate with her, and she just kept arguing with me. Also, not trying to point fingers but I think we both know who caused the broken ozone layer. Ahem, you.

Finally, there's your fascination with my beaches. You swarm to my beautiful shores for relaxation and recreation, without a second thought about the rising sea levels. You build your sandcastles as my oceans encroach, and I can't help but chuckle at the irony of planning a beach vacation on a coastline that's sinking faster than a lead balloon. Instead of sipping coconuts in the Bahamas, how about you try to save it first? First, embrace the winds of change by curbing your insatiable thirst for fossil fuels. The burning of these ancient relics coats my skies with thick blankets of carbon, warming my oceans and causing glaciers to sigh in defeat. Transition to cleaner energies, like the sun's gentle embrace and the wind's soothing whispers, and you'll quell the passion of my rising waters. And then there's the matter of waste—those troves of discarded dreams that pile up on my soil and swirl within my oceans. As you mend your habits, reduce, reuse, and recycle, you'll stem the tide of pollution that threatens to drown my delicate ecosystems and poison my life-giving waters.

So, here we are, my dear humans, in this cosmic tango. I jest, but let me assure you, that while I find your antics amusing, the consequences of your actions are far from a laughing matter. Climate change is real, and it's a challenge that we must face together. I've given my all to you but enough is enough, I know my worth. It's time to put your inventive minds to good use and come up with solutions that truly benefit both of us. In the grand theater of the universe, I'll keep spinning, changing, and evolving. And you, my inhabitants, have the power to shape the narrative of our shared journey. Let's make it

one that future generations can look back on with pride, rather than amusement. Or do you guys want to settle for my buddy, Mars?

Student Name: David Beckham Unaegbu

Grade: 10

School: Elsik High School

Title: Whispers in the Silence

Category: Poetry

Key: Silver 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: Selamawit Feyisa

Grade: 9

School: Kerr High School

Title: Whispers of Time

Category: Poetry

Key: Silver Key

Educator: Safraz Ali

Whispers of Time

In the quiet corners of memory,
Where the sun-kissed days reside,
There, among sepia-tinted echoes,
Dance the shadows of old friends.

They are the keepers of laughter,
The architects of secret hideaways,
Their names etched in the bark of trees,
And woven into the fabric of our souls.

Remember the summer afternoons?
We chased fireflies with reckless joy,
Our laughter echoing through fields,
As if the world itself joined our chorus.

Old friends, like well-worn books,
Their pages dog-eared by shared tales,
They know the chapters we dare not speak,
And the verses that still make us weep.

Through seasons of change, they remain—
Anchors in the tempests of life,
Their smiles etching constellations,
Guiding us back to familiar shores.

And when the years have etched lines,
Like rivers on ancient maps,
We'll sit together, gray and wise,
Sipping memories from porcelain cups.

For old friends are the sweetest vintage,
A blend of laughter, tears, and time,
And in their company, we find solace,
As the world spins on, and we with it.

Student Name: angel zamora

Grade: 10

School: Kerr High School

Title: Your Tea

Category: Poetry

Key: Silver Key

Educator:

I'm getting pulled into sorrow and despair,
like honey latching onto the spoon while you prepare your morning tea,
My nails clawing the rim of the cup for hope,
pulling myself out of the goo in which my body is being sucked into.

The hot tea boiling my feet,
drowning in the steam that fogs up your glasses,
blinding our view,
Losing my grip,
the condensation making the walls slippery,
I hold on the burning spoon,
my fingerprints fading with each second passing by,

I do not let go,
you dunk me underneath the sour boiling tea,
I do not let go,
you mix me,
melt me,
in a cyclone of emotions and flavor,

I make your tea sweet,

you make my honey disappear,
in an ocean of reflection and illusion.

Student Name: Dazhi Lu
Grade: 8
School: Nolan Ryan Junior High School
Title: Speak of the Devil
Category: Poetry
Key: Silver Key
Educator:

Speak of the devil, and he shall appear
A voice in the dark mocks your fear
Dwell too long, and, you'll disappear
He gives you plenty of time, so prepare for evil's cheer.

A needle broken is a step towards death
The sign of the blackberry, sign of death
Did Eve deceive? Or merely miss her calling,
The Serpent is gnawing
Chomping at its tail
Biting
Slowly
Consuming itself

Be negligent, and stay at the Cocytus
When you fall into his hands, prayers won't save you

The head of the goat
The hellfire burns through
He's coming

Do something wrong, you'll die quick
With his ways to hunt, you will succumb
You need to be strong, don't fall for his tricks
Beware of the signs, beware of the glyph.

If you call his name, he'll surely come near
Speak of the devil, and he shall appear.

Student Name: Elise D'Ávila

Grade: 12

School: Bridgeland High School

Title: Baby Pink

Category: Personal Essay & Memoir

Key: Silver Key

Educator:

When I was six, my favorite color was purple. To be fair, the only girl colors available were pink or purple so my options were limited.

Then, when I was seven, my favorite color was red. I have no idea why if I'm being honest, I don't remember choosing it over purple. I don't remember actually liking it that much at all. But I felt special for liking red. I was a Red Girl in a sea of Pink and Purple Girls.

When I was twelve my favorite color changed again. This time, I liked blue. Not a dark blue like denim jeans or the vast ocean. It had to be a powder blue like the afternoon sky — barely obscured by the occasional cloud. I remember thinking that I had finally chosen the perfect color. Blue wasn't a boy color (because boy colors didn't exist anymore) but it was still cool because it wasn't pink. I hated pink.

Pink was the kind of color that said,

"I'm girly and fussy and I think I'm better than you and you know it"

"I'm better than you because my mom lets me straighten my hair"

"I'm better than you because I wear mascara"

"I'm better than you because the boys in class fight over me"

Pink Girls were the exact opposite of me: while the boys fawned over them and they pretended not to notice, I befriended the boys. I befriended the girls too, but only Blue or Purple Girls. Pink Girls weren't really on my radar, not as friends anyway. I watched the Pink Girls like they were wild animals that needed to be observed at all times. If I tore my gaze away from them for even a moment I was sure their claws would descend. I was just waiting for the moment they turned from beautiful flowers into gnarly beasts with poison on their tongues. I watched them prance around, wearing makeup and perfume. They felt so far removed from me that I was sure that there must have been some sort of parasite burrowed into their brains that told them what to say and how to act. It told them to get boyfriends and cry in the bathroom when things didn't work out. It told them to shoot harsh glances in my direction when I failed some arbitrary test of girlhood that I wasn't aware I was even taking.

I was glad not to be one, really, I was. Because Pink Girls always had something to prove, didn't they? Pink Girls couldn't play sports during P.E. Pink Girls couldn't show up to school unless they looked their best. They had to wear their clean, white sneakers and their expensive clothes. They had to gossip during lunch and talk about boys and dresses and all sorts of other girly things that I obviously had no time for. Because a Blue Girl like me was smart and focused. I was always doing my homework and reading, I didn't have

the patience for their drama and I didn't care what anyone thought of me. Why should I? I didn't pretend to be friendly with Pink Girls and all the boys treated me like one of their own. So I could dress and act however I wanted. It was freedom.

But I saw Pink every day in my peripheral vision. I saw it on my sister in her eyeliner and earrings, I saw it on my cousins with their cool clothes and their friends, and I even saw it on my mother as she did her hair each morning. Pink didn't look so menacing then.

Maybe that's what possessed me to wear a dress to school. It was only once and never again. I didn't even really like the dress. It was ugly and floral. But it made me feel... pretty.

I should've known better than to wear it. I should've known I couldn't masquerade as a Pink Girl — not even for a day.

All my guy friends poked fun at me.

"What are you wearing?"

A dress.

"Are you wearing makeup?"

So what if I am?

"Why'd you dress up today anyway?"

I don't know...

"I didn't think you were like that."

I'm not... I just thought...

"You know we don't care, right?"

But it wasn't for you...

I didn't say any of that, of course. I just traipsed through my day, wearing the stupid dress and wishing the flowers would come to life so they could grow over me where I stood.

None of the Pink Girls said anything about my outfit, not that I wanted them to.

Pink Girls aren't friendly to Blue Girls.

But I decided that day that that was surely for the best. They can keep their gossip circles and their hair bows and their dresses and makeup. They can keep their pink. Because I didn't need it.

I didn't tell the boys that they hurt my feelings because if I was going to be soft and fussy I could go sit with the girls. And I wouldn't want that.

No Blue Girl would.

At fourteen, I was still resolutely Blue. I was going to stay that way forever, of course. I had seen what Pink Girls were like on the inside. Pink Girls could compliment your hair and then call you ugly in the same breath. Pink Girls could talk to you like a real person when you were alone but try their hardest to embarrass you in public. I knew what Pink was really like. The girls at school showed me most of that.

Everything else I learned about Pink was through observation, not experience. Regina George taught me pink was the color of backhanded compliments and betrayal. Sharpay Evans taught me that pink was the backdrop to jealousy and pettiness. It all seemed pretty straightforward to me.

Why would I want any part of that when I could easily stay friends with the boys? No drama, no cruelty, no pink.

At sixteen, I realized boys could be worse than Pink. Boys could hurt your feelings just as intentionally as girls. Boys could tell you things that made your skin suddenly feel itchy and foreign. They could make jokes that weren't funny and you would let them because you couldn't be perceived as sensitive. Boys could call you ugly just the same as any girl. And all of a sudden, I couldn't see much of a distinction between me and Pink at all. I was supposed to be different from the Pink Girls. The boys were supposed to treat me differently, they were supposed to respect me.

But the truth was that the only real difference between mine and the Pink's mistreatment was that when a Pink Girl was picked on, her friends defended her and held her close. While I sat and endured.

Alone.

The only difference between a Pink Girl and a Blue Girl was her favorite color. It started to feel like everything I had believed about girls and boys was wrong. I could remember a time when I hadn't seen a difference between any of us. When my favorite color was purple and that was all. When liking a color told me nothing about a person except what crayon they used the most.

When everything was so... simple.

I used to wear bows. I used to like princesses and flowers. And frilly lace and big ball gowns. I dreamed of the day I'd get to wear makeup. I practiced braiding strands of twine in the hopes that one day I'd be able to braid my own hair. I loved purple. I wasn't afraid to use pink in a drawing.

Pink never did anything to me.

But that all felt so distant now. It felt wrong to hunger for something different, to wish that I could smile with my teeth. To wish that I could wear a dress, that I could talk to the Pink Girls — befriend them.

Even in the throes of my revelations regarding favorite colors, pink isn't my favorite. Blue is still everything to me. But I've realized not everyone even likes colors the way that I do and I've started to think that favorite colors don't matter much at all. My father used to say that his favorite color changed by the day. My sister used to love neon green — a color she now abhors. For all the time I spend thinking I know my siblings so well and that colors are some sort of definitive pillar of personality, I don't know my oldest brother's favorite color.

I guess what I'm trying to say is that the only thing I really know is that I love blue. And I love purple. And green and orange and yellow and white and black and red and gray. I love doing my makeup and my hair. I love talking to other girls and having sleepovers. I love hugs and I love wearing dresses. I love feeling pretty and feminine. And pink. I love Baby Pink.

Student Name: Taylor(Blake) Stedman

Grade: 11

School: Bridgeland High School

Title: My room is a Graveyard

Category: Poetry

Key: Silver Key

Educator: Sarah Holland

The smell of death exudes from under the door
a substance red and smelling of copper
to enter the mausoleum
I must push

hard.

The concrete scrapes against my skin,
and creaks open.

A casket lies waiting
I know the body inside is mine
But, I do not recognize the flesh there.
my eyes shot and head caving in
flies buzz around my dead body
And maggots fall from my mouth

The mortician waits.
watching in the corner
yellow bone, peeking behind thin lips
They confess with their eyes

The murderer lives within

struck with fear

I crawl inside my casket

and pull the crown over

Like a child hiding under the covers

I'm not scared of the dark,

I'm scared of your hands.

I live here now

with my own decaying body

My family comes and goes

all paying their respects

It's pointless

I'll wake up dead again tomorrow

The tombstone carries my name

is it mine?

It sounds like someone else's

Mind and body

I am gone.

Student Name: Kate Whatley
Grade: 12
School: Bridgeland High School
Title: The Butterfly Fence
Category: Novel Writing
Key: Silver Key
Educator:

SUMMARY:

The Domestic Conflict has changed the world, eradicating America, neighboring countries and populations around the world. But two great havens stand tall amongst the rubble: Saris and Gloria. And after the execution of her grandfather, the creator of Gloria, Augustine and her cousins are sent to live in Glory House for the next 10 years, isolating themselves to learn about their life in rule ahead, as were the wishes of their mysterious grandfather. Although her life is lonely, Augustine finds comfort in her older cousin Tally and younger cousin Chet, as well as two brothers that visit every summer. But when Augustine witnesses the death of a beloved gardener that is ruled an accident, she begins to question her idyllic life and those closest to her. And after those 10 years are up and Augustine and her family step foot into Gloria for the first time, everything seems to go wrong in a matter of seconds, and Augustine finds herself alone in a strange place: The Known. Upon meeting new friends and forming new bonds, Augustine is determined to find out the truth about her family, save her cousins and apprehend the killer that has taken her family's place in rule. She will learn that people are not as they seem and that her whole life has been spent behind the infamous Butterfly Fence.

"Behind the wall

Hiding all

The things one wishes not to see.

With cheery hugs and harmless bugs

It hides things void of glee.

For there lies The Butterfly Fence

A front that people shrug away.
Such a beautiful little thing,
Yet sadly
Turning more evil by the day"

Unknown Known person

Augustine called them "Glory Days" whenever anyone asked about them. Most people were curious, usually the young ones, because she had led such a unique sort of life that beckoned overloads of questions and detailed stories. Hardly anyone really knew what to ask besides how she got there, why, who was with her, and maybe what she had to eat and how she got it. Because, from Augustine's rather poor story-telling skills, the circumstances of her childhood, the place where she had experienced a number of firsts and made a great deal of her memories, was seemingly impossible to access. Some people joked she truly was a prisoner, which had been a past accusation that weakened her hope of ever seeing the real world. But it was proven false when she began to read and study the life she would be prepared for. The life she would live outside of the walls.

The repetition of these stories only strengthened Augustine's ability to tell them and, surprisingly, willed her to refrain from embellishing them because the more she told them, the more she realized how fascinating it had been to live them. And that is what she expected all those young people to have the motive to do: live a life they, and no one else anywhere, could live.

Like any good story, most people had the common sense and decency to ask to start at the beginning. The decent part of it was to ask if she was even comfortable with telling these stories in the first place, as such an overload of memory could disrupt the balance of her mental state. However, Augustine being the woman that she was, it never troubled her to recall such times, even the ones that most certainly left her insides to ache. She was stronger. She was unbothered and willing. She was none of those things in the days before, the days that were described in her stories.



When the young ones would find time in their day to bother her with demands for stories, Augustine was usually the one to guide them with their choices. With children, she figured, it was best to start at the beginning, where things could be understood simpler than right there in the middle of a life. And when Augustine described the beginning, she would always mention that painting. From previous knowledge, which the majority of

these young people had at that time having been near Augustine so much, they knew that a painting such as the one she described was one that should have been seized and destroyed.

Augustine had been no more than 6 years old when she found that painting on the wall. The day had been gloomy and stressful for even a young girl such as herself. It was a day of death and sudden change, which struck herself and each member of her little family in an assortment of ways.

In that day, it had been years since the Domestic Conflict, so America and any other established country was hardly a thought. In fact, Augustine confessed not having learned about America until she was maybe 10 years old, but her audiences were never shocked; they themselves had probably heard about that place much later in life, so if anything, it made them feel terrible about themselves. What was America, and why hadn't you learned of it sooner, you dolt? But when Augustine mentioned the Domestic Conflict, minds usually snapped to attention, and that sickening feeling in the stomach often began to churn again, as it surely brought on an onslaught of poor memories. That was the thing about Augustine's stories: no matter how ugly and heart wrenching they could be, people wanted to be reminded of how things were and how things could have been.

That gloomy day in the beginning really started, for Augustine, inside of a warm, stuffy trampler, parked on a caliche drive in front of a strange-looking house. It had been warm and stuffy for hours it seemed because the journey had taken that long. Together with her family, (or would one even call it that?) Augustine Whitlock traveled from Marchville, Saris to a sister haven by the name of Gloria, one of the most renowned functioning societies since America and Augustine's birthplace. Marchville was a swanky section of Saris, a lesser known and increasingly lesser in infrastructure, health and space than its sister. But to Augustine, Marchville had been home. The suite at the top of the Marchville Inn, adorned with every sort of Sarisian finery imaginable and sweet with the smell of the people she had spent her first six years of life with, was all she needed. But that gloomy day was the first experience that Augustine had ever endured feeling homeless.

Seated beside her, hands bawled around a small, silvery treasure, was a then 19 year old Keela Wilde. Hers had been the face that Augustine had woke up smiling at as a babe, and hers had been the back of a head that Augustine woke puzzling at that very, gloomy morning. Augustine remembered the stillness of the room and how the sconces on either side of the bed she shared with her older cousin flickered. She could just feel the way that Keela's hair had looked that morning and, truly, every morning in that suite: silky and clean. Slipping out from beneath the covers, little Augustine crept over to the ornate wooden desk that her governess hovered over, curious as to her actions.

Keela had heard the little girl stir long before she even set foot on the carpet but, out of urgency, continued to write her last letter to her family.

Augustine gently tugged on Keela's black bell sleeve. Although gentle, this caused the tip of the pen to quake, making Keela's final few words nearly impossible to read.

No matter. Keela set down her pen and lifted Augustine into her lap, stroking her hair and soothing her as if she were still a baby.

"It is early," Keela whispered. "Did I wake you?"

Augustine rested her head in the crook of Keela's neck and said: "No. I got up by myself. What are you doing?"

Keela giggled like much older adults did in that day, when little girls were far too curious. "I am doing what I do nearly every morning, mi amor. I write to my family."

"What are you saying to them?"

Augustine, being too young at the time and otherwise unaware of the approaching situation, could not sense the fear and discomfort twisting inside Keela's breast. But looking back, Augustine figured that a woman as strong and present as her governess had been, not even the most perceptive person on the earth could have been able to tell what she was feeling in that moment. That was the magic of Keela Wilde.

Keela moved Augustine to her other leg, then began to fold the letter into thirds. "Well, I'm telling them about how I am faring--"

"What's 'faring' mean?"

"How one is getting along or proceeding." Keela resumed and placed the letter into a dark blue envelope. "Then I ask them for things I might need or want the three of you to try. My father is a lovely cook, and I'll ask him to send along sweet treats or home cooked meals for us to have. They remind me of home and give you and your cousins the opportunity to try something new."

Augustine would laugh when she thought of this moment because of how intensely her mouth had watered and how Keela's way of speaking could have anyone feeling how she wanted them to feel, the majority of these feelings being safe and comforted.

"I like your father a whole lot," Augustine had whispered, which sent Keela into a short yet silent fit of laughter before stamping the edge of the envelope with a small, striped square and sealing her letter inside.

"And then, I write about Tally, Chet and you. My mother loves to read about how much you are growing and how much closer each of you are to considering me a part of your life." Then Keela's voice sort of fell. "My presence can sometimes be considered invasive in the lives of children like you, so I am very glad that we have all...grown closer."

"Tally thinks you're invasive, doesn't she, Keela?" Augustine whispered, turning to find her cousin's body rising and falling beneath a thick comforter.

Keela only smiled, said: "Sometimes I think she does, Augustine. Other times, I think she needs me."

Then Keela set Augustine back on her feet to then stand herself, collecting her letter and straightening her desk. Always straightening and always tidying.

Augustine enjoyed explaining to people how silence and stillness had been a large part of her early life, how moments were filled with absolutely nothing and yet felt so normal and so comfortable. In that suite, one could hear everything in the silence and even notice things much easier than a loud, chatty atmosphere.

Augustine focused on the room around her and, as was her morning ritual, took in as much of it as she could. Because she knew that one day, hopefully a day very far from then, she would leave this place, never to see it again. Leaving meant forgetting. Forgetting meant losing, and Augustine never wanted to lose that place in her mind.

The room that connected to the room she stood in now, Keela's bedroom, was ajar, and looking in that crack of the door, one could see a collection of blue leather suitcases, each trimmed with gold incisions and gold-painted brass corners that seemed to glow in the room's dull light. Suitcases were something that Augustine associated with Keela leaving, as they were often what she carried on the one day or two a year that she left to visit her family in the southern block of Saris. Had that special occasion come again? If so, why was she writing to them?

Augustine turned to find Keela but found her not by the door but over her cousin's side of the bed. She had been trying to wake Tally, whispering sweet things to get her up and moving. And Augustine remembered that, as a child, she always copied Keela, wanting to be as motherly and as in control as she and would find herself venturing into the connecting room to find Chet.

In that day, Chet had been about a year old and spent most of his days in the comfort of a Sarisian-style bassinet. In the dim light, Augustine found it sitting by Keela's bed, which was exactly the same as the one she slept in, only it was made up and appeared, in some way, like it would never be slept in again.

Sarisian bassinets were personalized to each family and so, as a gift to the new baby Whitlock, the leaders of the Sarisian government had made a special bassinet to tell the story of his life, a life they hoped he would lead. And Augustine had become very familiar with these illustrations, as she was not near tall enough to see over the edge and spent a few moments tracing her fingers over the wooden carvings. There were people there that she could never recognize, like an older man, these three women and a structure covered in leafy vines. Then there was the wall, the one she would not recognize until she traveled to Gloria and was trapped behind it herself. It did not occur to young Augustine that these Sarisians hoped that one day, Chester Louis Whitlock, would live out his life behind the

confines of thick, stone walls. And it certainly did not occur to her that if she had her own bassinet, that very same carving would tell her that she shared the very same fate.

There was again a stillness and a silence inside that tramper once it had parked in front of the house. But Augustine was not yet witty enough to put the two and two together, to notice that the bassinet carvings were telling the future and that they had been right about that house covered in vines and the great stone wall the tramper had passed through.

Augustine recalled the luxurious layout of the tramper (trampers were not usually this lush as they had been for military use during the Domestic), how it looked like an Old World limousine that one might find in an ad or one of those Old World films that only a few of those in her audience could identify with. Across from the seat that Augustine sat in was another plush-looking seat, and she remembered Keela moving across from her before she disrupted the silence.

“Now I need both of you to listen to the things that I tell you,” Keela said.

At this, Augustine turned to find Tally slumped in the right corner of the car, eyes rolling any chance they could.

“Talia, sit up, please. I need your full attention.”

Tally obeyed eventually and crossed her arms across her small frame.

“Today, you meet your grandfather. It is the day that you have prepared for for a very, very long time, so I doubt very much that either of you should be considered unprepared.” Keela cleared her throat and pushed aside one of the window curtains to see outside. “Now, it is perfectly normal to have a nervous feeling because you have never met this man before. Neither have I, but it is my job that you meet him properly and listen to what he has to say, as well as follow the customs of your home, is that clear?”

Augustine nodded in synchronization with her cousin and felt a pang of excitement flutter through her stomach.

Stepping out of the tramper and venturing into the house was all a blur for Augustine. She truly only remembered the sheer amount of people, supposedly all there for them. The blue slacks and serious faces. Guards and handmaidens. Chet being passed from woman to woman before finally settling back in Keela’s arms, leaving her to stop his fussing.

But every time Augustine told the beginning story, she never once failed to mention the painting. Unbeknownst to her, it would be the first of many illegalities in Glory House that she found over the course of 10 years. It was this painting that, she once figured, was what condemned her mysterious grandfather to his death.

Student Name: Sophia Pham
Grade: 11
School: Cypress Ranch High School
Title: [Not] Home
Category: Poetry
Key: Silver Key
Educator:

When the clouds seem so fake they're like cotton candy

When the moon is a perfectly animated crescent

When the stars are drawn by an innocent child

is that when i'll find someone of my own?

When everyone finds one another

When I end up being alone like I imagined

When I go insane trying to find someone to hold onto

is that when i'll find someone of my own?

When I give up on my search for a person

When I turn to believing that there was never anyone

When I finally accept that I will only have myself to love

is that when i'll find someone of my own?

The clouds seem so fake they're like cotton candy

The moon is a perfectly animated crescent

The stars are drawn by an innocent child

Everyone has found one another

I ended up being alone like I imagined

I went insane trying to find someone to hold onto

I gave up on my search for a person

I turned to believing that there never was anyone

I finally accepted that I will only have myself to love

where is the person that was promised to be just for me?

Student Name: Valerie Edem
Grade: 11
School: Cypress Ranch High School
Title: An Inexplicable Fascination with Rocks
Category: Short Story
Key: Silver Key
Educator:

An Inexplicable Fascination with Rocks

Petra's dad loved rocks more than he loved his wife. While his wife spent her days slaving away in an office cubicle, Petra's dad searched outside for new rocks to bring home. He left Petra unsupervised for many hours, but it was all worth it if it meant bringing her back a chunk of the outdoors. In her early years, Petra spent most of her days inside, bedridden and bored. Frequently, she found herself jealous of the children who freely roamed outside with little fear of injury or illness. However, when her dad brought in the stones and let her pass them between her fingers, she felt just as free as anyone else. The joy this action sparked in her dark, childish eyes always left her father feeling fulfilled.

He rarely knew what to talk about with Petra, but always found ease in discussing the rocks he discovered every day.

"I found this one in a river. It might've been there for years or maybe centuries or millennia. That's the neat thing about rocks. They're almost immortal," her dad cupped the rock like a small animal as he spoke, an odd sense of gentleness present in his callused hands, "If rocks had eyes, they would see some incredible things. Like maybe this one got transported all the way from Australia, and has seen kangaroos, koalas, and all sorts of jellyfish as it got moved around." Petra giggled as her dad described the different animals. Eventually, her giggles would turn to a stumped silence as she tried to comprehend the longevity of rocks. Often, as her dad gave her more hypothetical stories of what the rocks had seen, she would reach her small hands out to grab onto the rough surfaces. Her dad kept some of the rocks and let Petra have the others to decorate her room with. Her windowsill became a small display of immortality.

When she was older and had more motor control than a feeble toddler, Petra's dad let her play with the precious stones as well. Using the money he snuck from his wife's purse, he successfully built a collection of gemstones that he stored in his desk's drawers.

Petra enjoyed staring at the huge diamonds or running her fingers along the fractured purple slots that made up the amethysts. She weighed cuprite and amber

between her hands and tossed emeralds up and down, grinning as she watched the green blurs they made in the air.

Occasionally, her dad would break the silence of her play with comments like, “Rubies and sapphires are actually the same gem, just different colors.” or “That diamond is actually worth over a thousand dollars, but I got it for just fifty.” Petra would perk up at his warm voice, enjoying its genuine tone. Apart from these comments, there was an air of general regret and irascibility in everything her dad said, so Petra appreciated the rare display of tranquility.

Sometimes, they lost track of time as they messed with the stones, and Petra’s mom would come home before they got to put them away. She was a frail, doll-like woman that seemed just as harmless as her daughter. However, finding out even more gems had been purchased than when she had last checked was enough to trigger her temper. Immediately, she would put on a mask of composure and compassion, before taking Petra to bed. As Petra stared at the dark outlines of the rocks on her windowsill, trying to force herself asleep, she would be kept awake by the shouting matches that ensued.

In the morning, her dad would explain how Petra’s mom had gotten mad because she was jealous of how beautiful the rocks were, noting how he’d be more cautious when they next played. “Your mom’s a real killjoy, isn’t she?”

Petra would nod vigorously, only for the sake of earning his wide grin of approval. That smile and the associated affection was much rarer in him than her mom, and thus held more value in Petra’s eyes.

Being too young to have a full concept of the inevitability of change, Petra supposed she and her dad would continue their rock loving antics forever. These days did continue for quite a while, until the morning she woke up to find all the rocks on her windowsill missing. She immediately felt her stomach kneading itself inside out. A strong sense of dread filled her mind as she got out of bed.

She stumbled out of her room and to her dad’s desk, where she found him seated with his head down. His drawers were wide open and empty.

Petra wanted to ask what had happened, whether they had been robbed, and if there was a way to get everything back, but she found herself unable to speak when she realized her dad was crying. It was no full-on bawl, but just the lightest brimming of tears, mixed with gentle snuffles.

Petra’s dad was a self-proclaimed tough guy. He had not cried in his youth when his mother beat him for things he hadn’t done. He did not cry when he got rejected from every college he applied to, two years in a row. He did not cry when what was supposed to be his first-born son came out as a blue-faced shell. He did not cry when Petra was hospitalized for the first time. He did not cry when he realized he had come to hate his “better half.” He certainly did not cry when he realized she hated him too.

Petra did not know all this but could still sense the complete break in custom that had just occurred. If it were her mom crying, a hug would suffice, but all Petra could manage now was to run right back to her room.

That evening, when Petra listened to the screaming and crashing that ensued between her parents, she was able to deduce that her mom had thrown out the rocks and minerals.

Afterwards, the incident was never brought up. It was impossible to talk about the disappearance of the rocks, for it was now eternally tied to the moment her dad cried. It was no different than seeing, for just a moment, the sky turn some bright green color instead of blue. It was best to just ignore the occurrence, and hope time would erase the memory and all doubts of reality that came with it. The only downside of the lack of acknowledgement was that there was no way for their usual bonding now, or to start devising a way to rebuild it.

In the years that followed, her father returned to his old ways. In the hours he had once spent observing rocks with his daughter, he instead wallowed in his own sorrow and watched TV. He slowly took up his drinking again, not because it gave him any comfort, but because he hoped it made his wife worried to see the bottles strewn about after. The motivations for his actions were a lot more revenge based than Petra ever suspected. All she saw was her father getting consumed by sadness, and her life being permanently restructured.

In truth, the change in routine was not all that drastic. Despite his usual position on the couch, her dad would still complete the regular functions of the day when he couldn't put them off any longer. Petra's mom remained at work for most hours of the day, and acknowledged her husband and daughter just as little as she had beforehand. She no longer even had the rocks as an excuse to interact with either of them.

Petra's dad had always been quite gloomy, since he regretted almost every major decision he had made in his life. The rocks were simply a distractor, and of course when Petra reflected on her past, she remembered her dad's idealized self, which only existed occasionally. Still, the perceived shift in his behavior from being idle only half of the time, to indolency fully taking over his life, was enough for Petra to feel as though her mom had disposed of familial affection along with those rocks.

Even as she grew strong enough to explore the world on her own, looking for unique rocks by herself was only a painful reminder of what had been lost.

Up until Petra's late teenage years, the sense of love and warmth that she occasionally heard in her dad's voice, and always sensed beneath her mom's tired exterior had all but evaporated. It could now only be found in the soft clattering of pebbles she kicked on the way back and forth from school. At some point between her menarche and first vape, Petra no longer found joy in even that. Her life became as bland as potch Opal, with only a few noble specks of color existing outside of her home. Sometimes, she still held out

hope that upon walking into the house, rather than the gruff, "Welcome back," her dad would give without turning his head from the TV, he would instead greet her in the warm tone he had once reserved just for his daughter.

Petra's father loved alcohol more than he loved his family. He slinked out of the house occasionally, for parties and barbecues with champagne and beer. He did not steal from his wife anymore, but occasionally begged Petra for her pocket money. Usually, she would refuse with the strongest disgust in her voice, but sometimes her desire for his approval resulted in him acquiring a few tens. A curt thank you, followed by his disappearance to the store was all Petra got in return.

Petra's mom no longer knew how to fixate her mask of composure when she found more bottles had been purchased without permission. No matter if Petra was there or not, her mom would begin a screaming fit that unfailingly ended in heaving sobs while her husband patted her back.

Now accustomed to change, Petra supposed that just like the disappearance of the rocks, eventually something big would happen again to replace her father's behavior with something else altogether. Maybe a new obsession, like shells or flowers, that he could bring home and talk about. Petra hated herself for hoping for it.

Either way, this hope died as suddenly as her father, on the night he chose to enter the car after a particularly long day of drinking.

Petra's mom had cried as though someone she loved had died, and Petra cried too, though she realized it wasn't for her father. It was for the potential that died with him. The gentle possibilities of one day bringing home a new rock or bargaining a new gem. Or rather, the possibilities he would say "I love you" once more and look upon her like she was one of the few remaining joys of his life.

On the drive back from his funeral, which was silent apart from occasional sniffles, Petra stared at her mom. She observed every concerned crease within her mother's face, each carved in by either Petra or her dad in one way or another. Petra realized, with a sinking sense of guilt, her mom was no killjoy. She was just a realist.

When they got home, her mom broke the tacit rule of not addressing the day the rocks had been taken.

"I took them," her mom's voice trembled as she watched her daughter's reaction of unsurprised disappointment. "But I didn't throw them away."

"Then, what did you do with them?" Petra choked out the words, with much effort to hide the shock in her voice. The shock that reality possibly could've been restored had she stumbled upon the rocks' hiding place and replenished what had been taken.

Petra's mom led her to a guest room they never used and knelt down to slide a large box out from under the bed. "He never really looked for them. I think he was being dramatic, there's no way he actually cared so much about all this junk," her mom's voice bordered on anger for a moment, then a soft breath of grief followed that erased all resentment.

"It's not junk. Some of the gems were worth thousands of dollars."

"Don't shout at me sweetheart," Petra shrank back at her mom's order, even though she thought her voice hadn't been all that loud. Her mom proceeded to dump out all the contents of the box. "The price of everything here added up was probably nowhere near one thousand. The gems are fake."

Petra stared at the rocks before her. The emeralds seemed duller than she remembered, and the diamonds more plastic. Even the rocks picked up from the street seemed fake in a way, as if they were lacking a sort of preciousness without the stories her dad told about them.

"Do you want them?" Her mom asked, "Even though I was mad at him, I shouldn't have taken them from you. I'm sorry. I'm really sorry."

The word "sorry" reverberated in Petra's mind for a while, before she quietly said, "No. I don't want them."

Petra's mom pursed her lips, then nodded, before scooping everything back into the box. "So." Petra's mom stared listlessly at the box for a moment. "Should I actually throw them out? I don't want these either. In fact, I hardly know why I kept them in the first place."

"Let me get rid of them," said Petra as she rose to her feet.

Her mom did not protest this at all. Petra took the box and went outside, so she could get some fresh air and stop sitting in the suffocating air of her father's absence.

As she strolled around the neighborhood, she dropped the various rocks in random places along the grass. When she reached the neighborhood playground, she placed the box in one of the plastic tunnels. Only the fake precious stones remained. She went home, wondering what exactly she wanted to happen. Perhaps all she hoped for was that one curious child grabbed one of those rocks or gems and asked a parent about it. Perhaps she hoped that the questions would inspire a soft, gentle, sort of tone that came with any parent enthusiastic about amazing their child with basic knowledge. Perhaps she hoped the rocks would end up in the hands of someone who loved their family more than anything else.

Student Name: Ayla Beard
Grade: 12
School: Cypress Woods High School
Title: Beauty in Femininity Essay
Category: Critical Essay
Key: Silver Key
Educator: Joshua Lopez

Beauty: the elegance and fragility of mankind. It has been the subject of many pieces of literature and artwork ranging from paintings to sculptures; all trying to create a tangible and perceivable version of beauty. Women, more often than not, were the subjects of these pieces, having been contorted into a perfect ideal created by man as a way to satisfy his fantasies of femininity. However, there is more to being feminine than having a dainty, slim figure. A woman has power and strength, and in there lies another kind of beauty. Femininity is not just about the attractiveness or appeal a woman could possess; it is about her ability to ignite the world with her power, and that creates beauty in its purest form.

When I went on a trip to D.C, I visited an art museum out of curiosity. While looking around, I stumbled across a painting that stuck with me in a negative way: A Saint James' Beauty. It was a pleasant piece to the eye, but there was a negative underlying message that stuck out to me among the twists of colorful paint.

Eyes are immediately drawn to the bright-colored figure in the middle of the piece. Wine-colored and white against the mundane browns and greens of the room—its bright hues flow in pools of silk down to the floor near where the woman is sitting, gazing out of the window. The dress is extravagant and deep with hints of white at the top and drapes down in curls. The painting captures the attention of viewers in the same way a woman must capture the attention of men. In the 1700s, dyed clothing was a luxury item, and it was clothing only nobility would wear as seen in a variety of portraits of royalty or aristocrats. The silk or cotton threads made these textiles more expensive. Burgundy was a popular color to wear due to the mix of the purples and reds that flowed together flawlessly (Smith). In the painting, the dark burgundy symbolizes the wealth and status women had to possess, and the intensity of the color creates the feeling of boldness and sophistication. The white, however, shows the purity and innocence of a woman.

The rose in her hands too, compliments her dress in the mixes of white and burgundy. The dark pink petals pick up the hints of light from the outside. The deep color represents her femininity and sweetness which corresponds with the other hues used to represent her. These colors portray how women must stand out among the crowds and have their

beauty put on display for all to witness, yet the sense of sweetness and innocence makes them untouchable to men.

After the eyes draw up from the liveliness of the gown, they notice the woman herself. The only figure noticeable in the painting, she looks softer on the eyes compared to the loud dress. Her soft features and poise make her appear angelic and cultivated. The paleness of her face, red blush glued to her cheekbones, and her perfectly plucked eyebrows give shape to her eyes. However, her face is rigid with a small, stiff smile—a smile that does not reach her eyes. Her solemn eyes gaze outside into a more vast world than the boxed room she resides in. Almost seemingly longing for something more, something just out of reach.

I sense her discomfort. She looks almost afraid that if she smiles any wider, she will ruin her delicate makeup. A large, extravagant white wig sits on top of her head, overshadowing her natural hair to add on in giving herself a more elegant and sophisticated look. These artistic features give her the appearance of a doll in a glass case—unfeeling and emotionless. This illustrates how women are often gazed upon, and the discomfort they feel having their beauty harshly judged.

In addition to her expression, the lady's posture betrays her unease. She sits up alarmingly straight on her futon couch, her arm folded over her lap in a delicate manner. She folds her legs, and she appears to look frozen to her seat, unable to make natural, flowing movement. The extravagant dress constricts her movements as it weighs her down on her seat, making her motionless. But it is not elegant, her posture is practiced and unnatural. In one of her hands, she clutches onto a single, deep pink rose. She holds it at an odd angle near her face as if to make herself appear daintier and more feminine. She grasps the rose in her hand which surely would have the thorns digging into her smooth skin, adding a scarlet hue onto the delicate verdant stem and darkening the pink petals. However, no blood can be found. The thorns having been plucked from the stem, nowhere to be seen leaving the flower vulnerable and delicate-looking. Like how a woman is plucked of her imperfections to leave behind this image of how a woman should be: doll-like and pliant. Perfection kept in a display case.

'A Saint James's Beauty' artfully portrays that beauty is untouchable and meant to be put on display for all to witness and marvel at. However, Carington presents beauty as something that is only skin deep; a physical trait that women are meant to strive for. However, there is more to beauty than appearances. Women show their beauty through their power and strength; their ability to conquer the world with their determination. Poet Ada Limon discusses this point in her poem, "How to Triumph Like a Girl."

Ada Limon is a U.S. poet who has written many poetry books and was a finalist for the National Book Award and many other awards. One of her more famous poems I had read was, "How to Triumph Like a Girl." In this poem, Limon compares female horses to women and their potential for power and greatness. She writes,

. . . As if this big
dangerous animal is also a part of me,
that somewhere inside the delicate
skin of my body, there pumps
an 8-pound female horse heart,
giant with power, heavy with blood. (Limon 8-13)

Limon conveys the idea that it is not a woman's delicate features, but the untamed, wild power that shows her true beauty. She states that she feels "as if this big dangerous creature is also a part of [her]" (Limon 8-9). A beauty that comes from deep within and not just the superficiality of outward appearances. That even under the delicate skin of a woman's body, there lies her unbridled confidence and ferocity. Women are untamed and strong just like the lady horses who race on the tracks. Comparing women to these large creatures serves to contradict the beauty standards women were subjected to. Creating the image that women were powerful and giant; not meek or quiet. A woman of Limon's description does not bend her will to those around her. She stands tall and proud; her head held high in the air. Her heart runs "heavy with blood," not ashamed of who she is or what she will become. (Limon 13). The parts once seen as flaws in a woman's life have now become her new source of power, a new outlet of strength that lies deep within her soul.

The diction in this poem serves to juxtapose the cliché image of what defines a woman. Words like "big," "swagger," and "dangerous" are used to describe the power in femininity and celebrate the values a woman knows she possesses. Words that were once used to put blemishes on a woman were redefined to be seen as the strengths women had that made them a force to be reckoned with. The power in those words serves as a reminder that women are not perfect, ethereal beings meant for men's admiration. Women have their own grace and beauty in the way they carry themselves, like victory is within their grasp.

A woman's beauty is not skin deep; it comes from within and radiates from her through her untamed power. A woman is not someone who walks in the shadow of her husband, or someone who speaks in a whisper; afraid to disturb others with what she says. She is a powerful figure who has a lion in her heart.

Student Name: Lindsie Vasquez
Grade: 11
School: Cypress Woods High School
Title: It's in my blood
Category: Personal Essay & Memoir
Key: Silver Key
Educator:

The sweet smell of corn and the savory scent of meat fills my nose as I exit the car. My heart glows as it feels the beat of Selena. I make my entrance and greet my loving family with kisses and hugs.

"Ay, mija you've grown so much. I'm so glad you made it!" my tia embraces me with warmth and comfort.

My spirit feels that it belongs.

I open the door to the house where my childhood had once flourished. My cousins sit around the table with bowls of masa, corn husks, and assorted fillings. "Come help us! We have so much to make." My cousin smiles.

I sit down and watch my grandma flatten the masa, filling it with chicken and cheese, rolls, and wraps with the corn husk. She takes a sting of the husk and ties the tamale with a bow as if she were wrapping a Christmas present. I perfectly mimic the motions of my grandma and show her the wrapped tamale.

My other cousin smiles and giggles "Ayy, look at the no sabo kid. She knows how to make tamales."

The words "No sabo kid" linger like a bad smell for a bit but my laughter is loud enough to clear the air.

" Obviously it's in my blood" I smile.

We continue our hard work, crafting each tamale with love and laughter. Once they are done me and my cousins help our grandmother carry them out to our grandfather so they can be cooked. Once delivered, we join the life of the party. The smell of smoke from the grill mixes with the sweet assorted fruit on the tables. Squealing from the younger cousins as they chase each other, gossip and giggles from the tias and booms of laughter from the tios. The thumping of the bass encourages my feet to dance but I don't. I wasn't taught the dances of my culture. Shame fills me up with insecurity and washes out my confidence. I drain it out by joining my cousins at the white foldable table. They pass me a clear glass cup of vibrant red and I take a long sip of the sweet but tart juice that brings security again.

" I could drink Jamaica all day," I say with a slurp and my cousins agree.

We begin to talk about school and boys and fill the air with our laughter.

"Chismosas!" My grandmother says with a smile as she walks by.

Easy Spanish. We giggle at her comment and continue our gossip until one of our tios arrives at our table.

"HOLA, como estas?."

We all smiled and one of my cousins replied " Bien!"

Easy Spanish.

" Bien bien, Y tu? ... Y tu?" he says pointing to each of us.

His finger points to me and I quietly say bien.

" That's good ! So you know Spanish yet?" he questions but with a wide smile.

There it is again. THAT feeling. Shame tightens my stomach and colors my cheeks pink.

"Oh no, not really. I still have trouble speaking it," I speak, shyly.

"Aw that's okay you'll learn." he comforts me.

"Yeah, one day. It's in my blood" I joke to hide the shame.

The language is familiar to the ears, and known by the brain, but is lost at the tongue. The traditions are talked about and taught but not always celebrated. We see the dances but our feet still ponder the steps. The food is eaten but not always taught how to be prepared. How could someone feel so close to their culture yet so far away? It is in my blood right? Then why doesn't it feel like it? I feel that if I learn these things then maybe the shame would not exist. I would fit in just fine with my own family even if they accept me just how I am. I wish that shame would see that I am accepted but it continues to knock on the door and tell me I'm not. I wish that I was able to walk up and knock down shame's door and tell it "It's in my blood".

Student Name: William Choi-Kim
Grade: 10
School: Cy-Fair High School
Title: Jericho and Dwejimi
Category: Dramatic Script
Key: Silver Key
Educator: Samantha Commander

EXT. DARK ALLEY - NIGHT

CHILDREN huddle around a burning trash can as their MOM and DAD tell a story.

DAD

Have we ever told you how our great America came to be?

CHILDREN

(in unison, excitedly)

No! Tell us, tell us, tell us!

MOM

Many years ago, before the world imploded, there was a young man named Jericho.

DAD

They say he was born dead, that a goddess' touch brought him back to life. They say he was something of a god himself.

MOM

Oh, but it actually begins before that, with a boy named Dwejimi. Dwejimi was a lot like Jericho, but much worse. He was angry, and insane, and a little bit evil.

CHILDREN

(quietly whimpering)

Is this story scary, Momma?

MOM

Do you wanna hear the story or not?

CHILDREN

(Small nods)

Yes Momma, we want to hear the story!

MOM

Well then. We begin in Elysia...

FADE OUT:

INT. PALACE BEDROOM - DAY

EZEKIEL lies in a bed, staring out a window. His SERVANTS stand beside him, appearing worried. The MOM stands on the side of the stage with her CHILDREN by a burning barrel, invisible to EZEKIEL and his SERVANTS.

EZEKIEL
(groaning)
Hannah!

HANNAH
(bowing)
Yes, my lord?

EZEKIEL
Bring me a boy. Strong-willed, sturdy. Worthy of a throne.

HANNAH
(confoundedly)
A boy, Your Majesty?

EZEKIEL
(aggravated)
Yes, yes, a boy! Quickly, before your king wastes away!

HANNAH
Yes, sire.

MOM
That's right, children. King Ezekiel asked Hannah to go kidnap a child. If you don't listen to your mommy and daddy, King Ezekiel will get you too!

HANNAH
(rushing in with Dwejimi)
A boy, my liege. The doctor says he will grow to be very strong.

EZEKIEL

Be gone with you. I need to talk with this boy alone.

HANNAH

(bowing, walking away)

Very well, my lord.

EZEKIEL

(turning to the child)

What might be your name, young one?

DWEJIMI

(turning away nervously)

Bomi, King Ezekiel.

EZEKIEL

(harrumphs)

A dull name. Your name is now Dwejimi, and you are now my son.

DWEJIMI

(looking up surprisedly)

Your son? Your honor, I have a family!

EZEKIEL

Hannah! Where did you find this boy?

HANNAH

At the market, my lord.

DWEJIMI

(angrily)

You took me from my life! Return me!

EZEKIEL

(shocked)

You would choose your family over your king? Traitorous wench!

DWEJIMI

(bowing)

Apologies, my lord.

EZEKIEL

(deadpan)

You will make a good king, Dwejimi. But you must learn to never apologize.

INT. LIVING ROOM - NIGHT

The FISHERMAN sits in a large leather chair. A sharp knock is heard.

FISHERMAN

(startled)

What?! Who's there?

(opening the door)

Wha-

TILDE

Oh the wind's frightful out here! Would you be so kind as to let a poor woman seek shelter in your home?

FISHERMAN

(lame)

Couch is on the left.

(retreats to chair)

Don't drip on it.

TILDE

(surprised, muttering)

This one's different. They're usually so rude!

FISHERMAN

(shouting)

Close the door, daft idiot! It's getting cold!

TILDE

And... there it is.

FADE OUT:

INT. BATHROOM - DAY

TILDE lies in a bathtub across from a mirror with the FISHERMAN and the DOCTOR.

TILDE

(groaning)
The baby's coming!

FISHERMAN
You're okay. You're okay.
(Turns to mirror)
You're going to be okay.

TILDE
(screaming)
Why'd I choose a natural birth?

DOCTOR
(holding newborn baby)
He's come way too early.
(sighing, disappointed)
He's stillborn.

TILDE
(weakly)
I can help... bring my baby to me...
(strokes the baby's head)
Return to me, my child.

BABY
(cooing)
Baba.

DOCTOR
(fearfully)
How? This is the work of witches!

TILDE
(disgustedly)
I am not a witch. I am a god!
(falls unconscious)
Ugh.

FADE OUT:

EXT. BATTLEFIELD - DAY

DWEJIMI stands in front of smoking rubble, his armor bloody and damaged. His AIDE approaches him with a grim look on their face.

AIDE

Apologies, my lord. There's nothing more to be done. Elysia has fallen.

DWEJIMI

(throws his helmet to the ground)

Curse the gods!

AIDE

(backing away)

I- I apologize, Your Majesty.

DWEJIMI

Order the men to mount up. We're defending what little we have, if nothing else.

AIDE

Yes, my lord.

GENERAL

(Rushes in from left stage)

The army is ready, my lord. But is this truly the fate you wish to doom us to?

DWEJIMI

(angrily)

For what land will we live if not for Elysia? Who will you live for if not your king?

GENERAL

(pleading)

We live for our homes - our lives, our wives - my king! We would kill for you, but we beg you, do not make us die for you.

DWEJIMI

(coldly)

You will fight, General, or it will be your wife's head on the ground, not yours.

GENERAL

(angrily)

You threaten my wife?! You may be a king, but you are a king of ruins!

(gesturing with arms)

Of nothing! I should cut you down here and now!

DWEJIMI

(soft, quiet, dangerous voice)

Lay a hand on your blade, and you will learn exactly what makes me king. Go home. I'll lead the men myself.

GENERAL

(turning around, restrained)

Yes, my lord.

DWEJIMI

(Smiling slightly)

Oh, and General? I apologize for the mess.

GENERAL

(surprised)

Wha-

FADE OUT:

EXT. BATTLEFIELD - DAY

DWEJIMI stands above the GENERAL's corpse.

DWEJIMI

(sobbing)

What gods have I angered? Why am I doomed to fall to mere barbarians...

(trailing off)

What gods...

AIDE

(approaching quietly)

My king, they request a meeting.

DWEJIMI

(screaming)

Tell them they can have it all. There's nothing left worth fighting for anyway.

AIDE

They want to end this war, sir.

DWEJIMI

(indignant)

Tribute? They dare demand a tribute? I am a king! I will not bow...

(calms himself)

Take the deal. Before I go mad.

AIDE

Right away, my liege. You have saved Elysia.

DWEJIMI

(laughing dryly)

Elysia died with my father.

AIDE

You have saved us.

DWEJIMI

What a pitiful king I am, consoled by mere house servants.

AIDE

(sighing)

You still have our thanks, my king.

FADE OUT:

EXT. ROAD - DAY

JERICHO mounts a horse, TILDE and the FISHERMAN tearfully watching.

TILDE

Good fare, my son.

FISHERMAN

Be careful boy. A kingdom is not worth your life.

JERICHO

But it is, father. What am I if not a king? A divine son without a throne is a farmer without his fields!

FISHERMAN

But a farmer alive with no crops is happier than a farmer dead in the ground.

JERICHO

Is he? Or is he so miserable he would take his own life?

FADE OUT:

EXT. FIELD - DAY

JERICHO stands opposite a ginormous MEERKAT that towers over him.

JERICHO

Let me pass, animal menace. I am Jericho, hero of...

MEERKAT

(patronizing)

Ah, another hero. What foolish honorable mission are you on?

JERICHO

I seek to rule my own kingdom. I dream of a kingdom where men share in camaraderie, where an animal like you and a hero like I can live together, in peace!

MEERKAT

(incredulous)

An animal?! Is that how you see me? How you all see me? I am more refined, more sophisticated, than any...

(sneering)

human will ever be! I have existed for millennia, and will exist for millennia!

(shouting)

You puny beings live half a century and call yourselves wise! You build your little stone rectangles and call them palaces! You wield heavy chunks of metal and call them weapons!

(bellowing)

I exist in a plane so above you cannot begin to comprehend it! I- to you, I am a god!

JERICHO

You're right, great meerkat. I only meant to analogize, not to offend. But for all your years, I wager that I can still beat you in any game of logic!

MEERKAT

(jeering)

Is that so? Then riddle me this, fair hero: what frightens an elephant, but not a bird?
Answer this, and I shall let you pass.

JERICHO

You ask for an answer, but the one I give will not please you. The answer is not a mouse, as you postulate, but in fact a bug!

MEERKAT

(stalwart)

Explain.

JERICHO

It is but a myth that a mouse scares an elephant, for a quick movement from a small thing startles all, even something as giant as an elephant. But take, for example, a honey bee. A bird will happily eat such a pest, but an elephant will run and trumpet!

MEERKAT

(nodding)

An interesting take, little human. You may pass.

JERICHO

(walking past)

Come visit sometime. You'd like it in my kingdom.

MEERKAT

I'll visit when you actually have a kingdom.

SMASH CUT:

EXT. FOREST - NIGHT

JERICHO stands opposite an ASSASSIN.

ASSASSIN

Halt! Hand over your gold, traveler.

JERICHO

I have no will to give it, nor it to give.

ASSASSIN

Then a blood tax. Raise your arms!

JERICHO
 (raising his arms)
 Why?

ASSASSIN
 (exasperated)
 Every time...
 (mumbling and holding his head)
 every time...
 (shouting)
 I meant your sword, fool, your sword!

JERICHO
 (sneaking behind the assassin)
 Fool, you say?

ASSASSIN
 (posing)
 Crafty... parley!

JERICHO
 (aggressively stabbing)
 What tomfoolery is that stance?

ASSASSIN
 (panting, coughing up blood)
 Well played, fool, well played.

SMASH CUT:

EXT. VILLAGE - DAY

JERICHO stands opposite an OLD MAN.

JERICHO
 This feels oddly twisted...

OLD MAN
 (menacing)
 Die, cream-faced loon!

JERICHO

Nevermind.

OLD MAN

(running towards Jericho)

DIE!

JERICHO

(pushing the old man by his head using one hand)

I am Jericho, son of the god Tilde, conquerer of assassins, wiser than meerkats, nightmare of...

(pauses)

the elderly!

SMASH CUT:

EXT. VALLEY - DAY

JERICHO stands in a valley, examining the land.

JERICHO

(gasping)

Finally! A place to begin my kingdom! It shall be marvelous. I shall call it... Pidyndale!

FADE OUT:

INT. THRONE ROOM - DAY

DWEJIMI lies on the floor in front of his throne. His AIDE rushes in with a COURIER.

AIDE

Sire, there's a courier here. He brings news of a new kingdom in the West!

DWEJIMI

(leaping to his feet)

What man dares rule where my kingdom stood?!

COURIER

Jericho MacIntyre hereby declares the founding of the kingdom of Pidyndale.

DWEJIMI

(yelling angrily)

HANNAH! Get the troops ready! We're going on a crusade!

AIDE

My name's not...

(shaking head)

nevermind. Yes, immediately, my lord. And of the barbarians?

DWEJIMI

Curse them! We'll cut a path right through them if we have to. Just ready the troops!

AIDE

(whimpering)

Yes, sire.

DWEJIMI

And get me some candied figs!

EXT. BATTLEFIELD - DAY

DWEJIMI and his ARMY stand opposite the BARBARIAN KING and the BARBARIAN ARMY.

BARBARIAN KING

Where do you think you're going, little king?

DWEJIMI

We wish you no harm, barbarian. We simply have business to attend to at the remains of Elysia.

BARBARIAN KING

No one crosses the border. Not even you, illiterate, pitiable wench.

DWEJIMI

(gritting teeth)

It's urgent business. We will return. The tithe will be paid in full. Let us pass. And I am not illiterate, you half-minded fool!

BARBARIAN KING

(stomping)

You. Will. Not. Leave. I have spoken. Return to your palace, white one.

DWEJIMI

(indignant)

Your forces look sick, king. Are you sure they could withstand me?

BARBARIAN KING

(enraged)

Is that a threat?

DWEJIMI

Of course not. Simply... an observation. But I would suggest you send some of your troops home. They look... weak.

BARBARIAN KING

(sighing)

My army is ailing.

(resolute)

But it will never - never! - fall to yours.

DWEJIMI

(guffawing)

This is not your choice. Let us pass.

BARBARIAN KING

No. This is your final warning. Go. Home.

DWEJIMI

(turning to army)

You heard the man. Let's go home. Let's go to our ancestral Elysia!

ARMY

(roaring)

Glory to Elysia!

DWEJIMI

Charge!

BARBARIAN KING

(raising arm)

Form up! The traitor king must not pass!

BARBARIAN ARMY

(groaning)

M-my lord!

BARBARIAN KING

Fools! Cowards! Weaklings! Stand for your king!

BARBARIAN SOLDIER

(throws up on king's shoes)

We have failed you.. my lord.

DWEJIMI

Onward, to Elysia!

EXT. PIDYNDALE - DUSK

DWEJIMI sits on a horse on the opposite side of an opaque wall as JERICHO, also on a horse. DWEJIMI's ARMY stands behind him.

DWEJIMI

(sing-song)

Open the gates, Jericho. I have an army, and you have but a mare.

JERICHO

(calmly)

An army, you say? Well, I have the power of the divine.

DWEJIMI

I believe I can beat a man. Blast the gods, they can kill me after. Release the balls!

Balls roll into the wall, and sections collapse.

DWEJIMI

Ready to surrender yet?

JERICHO

Hardly! As you said, I have but a mare and my own life, and that cannot be threatened by these balls of stone.

DWEJIMI

Balls of stone, indeed!

JERICHO

Balls of stone? Nay. There is something I await. I will not lose today.

FADE OUT:

INT. SHACK - DAY

CHIKIM stands opposite CHIKIM'S MOM, in a shack with JERICHO's portrait on the mantle.

CHIKIM

Come on, Mom, what did you want to show me?

CHIKIM'S MOM

Patience, Chikim.

(looks up, looks down)

you hardly have any place to be anyways.

CHIKIM

Mom! What's that supposed to mean?

CHIKIM'S MOM

Well, it means you're

(inhales deeply)

disorganized, messy, unemployed, disheveled, lazy, worthless, disappointing...

CHIKIM

Yes, yes, I get it, I'm awesome. What did you want to show me?

CHIKIM'S MOM

Oh, yes, I wanted to give you this.

(pulls out a broken half of a sword)

It's a sword, a gift from your good-for-nothing father.

CHIKIM

(bouncing excitedly)

Shiny!

CHIKIM'S MOM

Just, get out of here. He needs help. I heard his girly screams last night.

CHIKIM

Where is he?

CHIKIM'S MOM

How would I know? He's probably somewhere in the middle of nowhere, cock fighting with some drunk ogre and calling it conquering the world!

CHIKIM

Ah, so he's in Elysia.

CHIKIM'S MOM

(exasperated)

Yes, he's in Elysia!

CHIKIM

(muttering)

You could have just said that...

CHIKIM'S MOM

(raising shoe)

What did you say?!

FADE OUT:

EXT. PIDYNDALE - DUSK

JERICHO is leaning backward precariously as DWEJIMI's sword grazes his neck.

DWEJIMI

Surrender!

JERICHO

(pouty)

No.

DWEJIMI

(exhausted)

You either surrender, or you die. What do you mean, "No?"

JERICHO

(resolute)

Then I'd rather die.

DWEJIMI

You do realize this isn't a movie, right?

JERICHO

No, but...

(turns towards audience, winks)

it might as well be, with how heroic I'm being.

DWEJIMI

Not the time!

JERICHO

Apologies.

(pulls out a broken sword)

This will be your doom!

DWEJIMI

(cackling)

And they said I was insane! What do you think you're going to do with that, hit me over the head?

JERICHO

I'm waiting for someone.

DWEJIMI

Well someone better be here quickly - I'm a second away from slicing your head off.

JERICHO

(worried)

Just... just give me a minute.

DWEJIMI

No.

(raises sword, strikes down in slow motion)

DIE!

CHIKIM

(rushing in, intercepting sword)

Hands off my good-for-nothing father!

JERICHO

(abashedly)

I... I see you had a nice little talk with your mother...

DWEJIMI

(shocked)

What accursed family dynamic is this?!

JERICHO

A very broken one.

(turns towards Chikim)

It's time to fix it!

CHIKIM

(touched)

Awww...

JERICHO

(yelling)

The sword, you good-for-nothing boy, the sword!

CHIKIM

(fumbling)

Yes, father, yes sir!

JERICHO

(angrily)

CHILD!

CHIKIM

(frantically)

I- I'm working on it!

JERICHO

Work harder!

DWEJIMI

(confused)

Hello? I'm still here?

JERICHO

(swinging sword haphazardly)

Give my son some space! He's still developing!

CHIKIM

(assembles sword)

Got it!

JERICHO

(snatching urgently, charging)

Fall, unholy usurper!

DWEJIMI

(screams, collapses to the ground)

What work of the gods is this?!

JERICHO

(hesitates)

I would kill you, but you have people to tend to.

(thinks)

But a tithe must be paid. Your leg it is.

(hacks at leg)

May the gods be pleased.

DWEJIMI

(crawling away)

You righteous maniac! Have your kingdom, have it! I don't want it anymore! But remember this - I let you have it! You did. Not. Win!

FADE TO BLACK:

EXT. DARK ALLEY - NIGHT

CHILDREN huddle around a burning trash can as their MOM and DAD tell a story.

CHILDREN

Then Mama, why are we like this now?

MOM

Well, Jericho died.

CHILDREN

So then... when Dad dies, we'll all die too? Because you and Dad always say we're your whole world!

MOM

(cooing)

Aww... that's so sweet!

DAD

(choking)

Caroline! Help!

MOM

(annoyed)

That's not funny, Max. Stop it!

DAD

(collapses on the floor, spasms)

Eugh!

MOM

(poking the father with a stick)

Yeah, he's dead. I wonder why...

(picks up plate)

Children, where did you get this meat?

CHILDREN

The sewers, Mama, just like you said!

MOM

I said the shopping mall!

CHILDREN

Fuck.

FADE OUT:

Student Name: Dove Dixon
Grade: 11
School: Cypress Creek High School
Title: Recognition
Category: Short Story
Key: Silver Key
Educator:

Revelation came in the form of a drawing, for Alessandra.

It was memories, flooding her mind and penetrating her soul, like looking into a once-tarnished mirror and finally seeing herself. It was clarity, displayed on the wall of the Galleria Nazionale.

The Head of a Woman— that was the name of it— showed soft brushstrokes shaping around loose, disheveled curls. Her hand came up to brush against her own, feeling the wavy hair like silk.

That was her, she knew, her own aged-up features framed like a masterpiece. The little white card hanging underneath said that the subject's identity was never recorded.

...that couldn't be right.

"Mama," she said, tugging at her mother's sleeve, "That's me."

Her mother hummed. "I guess it does look a little similar, but you're too young for me to really see it. Is it your favorite?"

No, Alessandra thought, It's me and I remember posing and sketching and hammering canvas onto boards. I remember da Vinci himself.

Instead of lying, instead of placating her mother, she shouted, "No! I painted that!"

The already-quiet museum went silent, conversations pausing as people turned to stare. Her mother placed a hand on her shoulder, gentle but the warning evident.

To Alessandra, the sketch— the self portrait— was hers. She could vividly remember herself sitting in front of a mirror, head tilted as she drew her reflection. It was a sketch for her mentor to reference while he painted a larger piece, *The Virgin of the Rocks*.

To her mother, she was a little girl with an overactive imagination and a favorite painting, causing a scene in front of everyone.

She promised to hear her daughter out, later, hoping that she would forget about the tantrum entirely.

That wouldn't happen.

For days, weeks, months on end, Alessandra refused to let it go. She brought it up in every conversation, in every little moment she could. She even learned the words for it, little mouth struggling around, "I'm reincarnated, and I worked for Leonardo da Vinci."

Desolation came for her second, when she realized no one would ever believe her.

That her work would go forever uncredited, her existence erased— she refused to settle for that.

So, she kept trying, kept talking.

Her mother took her first to a psychic, an ancient-looking woman in a Venice hole-in-the-wall. Not even the woman who read cards and hands and crystals all day believed Alessandra, and they moved onward.

Next it was a doctor who'd insisted she'd just had an overactive imagination, and when she got older, it was a psychiatrist who took one look at her and declared her delusional. She'd laughed, when he'd said that.

Every day she flushed her medicine down the toilet, and every day she alienated herself a little further. People at school grew tired of her talking about antiquated painting techniques, people in her family grew tired of her.

And as she kept pushing, kept trying, she garnered a following: a gaggle of journalists, snapping photos and writing articles mocking the crazy girl who thought she was da Vinci.

(For the record, Alessandra never claimed to be da Vinci. She claimed— she knew that she had worked under him, never to be recorded because she was a woman.)

It had taken her a little bit to conceptualize that— times were different now, and despite her memories she'd still had the mind of a child, still had been raised in kinder times.

Eventually, Alessandra gave up. In her twenties she moved from Italy to Germany, living out of a tiny flat filled with empty wine bottles and sketchbooks collecting dust. She lived off the art she knew how to make, selling at every art fair and hiding her face.

Even if she wasn't in Italy anymore, she didn't want to chance being recognized. Alessandra just wanted to be left alone.

And alone she was.

Alessandra didn't talk to her family anymore— her mother even less.

She'd never had any friends of her own, anyways, and even the other regular vendors at the art fairs gossiped about her. She grew used to it, really.

The years stretched on, and she stayed alone.

Sometimes, in the dead of night, she regretted. She wondered if she was doing it all wrong, wondered if she'd gotten a second chance at life only to waste it.

In her heart, though, she knew that wasn't the case. Spirits didn't linger from the afterlife just to have another go— no, they came back to right the wrongs and unfinished business of the past.

And, without anyone to listen to her, she began to ponder if it was even worth it. In her first life, she'd been forgotten, but in this one, she was ridiculed.

Sometimes, in the dead of night, she regretted. Sometimes, she figured that since she'd already died once, a second time would be nothing.

It was only her desire, her need to tell her story, that stopped her from acting on that thought, and then Salvation came.

Salvation came in the form of an email, one she immediately selected and prepared to delete.

Salvation came in the form of an email, sent to the address on her business card.

Salvation came in the form of an email, written in Italian, not German, from someone with a university domain and terrible etiquette.

"hey." Salvation read, in plain text on a white screen, "are you the girl who thinks she worked under da vinci??"

Alessandra didn't want to answer— she wanted nothing to do with any kids trying to prank her, any journalists who wanted to dig her story out of its grave for a quick buck.

And answer she didn't, but still it lingered in her mind. They'd found her business email. This was someone dedicated, someone who put in the effort to work around her changed name and a different country. This was someone dedicated, someone unperturbed by her best efforts to shake their trail.

A week of torment later, another email appeared.

"Please. I'm an aspiring art historian trying to write my thesis," it read, "I found a journal— I believe it's yours. I would like to speak with you in person."

Alessandra sighed and groaned and did everything she could to put it off, but inevitably she still responded.

She set a time, a date, a meeting place in public, and prepared herself for the worst.

The worst, however, didn't come.

Her salvation took the shape of a wiry little man, adorned only with a terrible blazer and pathetic facial hair. His name was Vincenzo, going by just Enzo, and the first thing he told her when they met was that he believed in ghosts.

Truly a man of science, she thought, shaking his clammy hand.

Enzo was an up-and-coming researcher, studying the Renaissance period with an affinity for hands-on field work. A scavenger, not a thinker, she noted.

He presented her with a journal, one she indeed recognized as her own, and said someone had recently discovered it, covered in dirt and protected only by a rotting wooden box. When she'd asked how he'd gotten hold of it, his only response was a slightly nervous, slightly mischievous grin.

In turn he asked her countless questions, assuring her that he would learn her story first, then gather the evidence to support it second. She couldn't really agree with his methods, but she wasn't in a place to argue. Not when she was so close, not when she was this close.

Enzo promised her that he'd succeed, that he'd get her story told and her works finally credited.

When she'd asked another question— why he was doing this— his only response was a wave of his hand and a wink, mumbling something about a favor for an old friend.

She supposed that was as good enough of a reason as any.

For the first time in her second life, someone believed Alessandra. For the first time in either of her lives, she was going to be remembered for her achievements.

With a friend who only felt a little familiar, she set off to do what she'd always known she'd do— prove herself, prove her existence to the world. And this time, when it was all over and done, she wouldn't look back.

After all— she wouldn't need to. Not this time.

Student Name: Ember Schoen
Grade: 8
School: Deer Park Junior High School
Title: A Wolfs Key to Freedom
Category: Flash Fiction
Key: Silver Key
Educator: Paula Shamburger

"I hear they found a wolf-walker in this here city," said a shopkeeper to one of the customers. The customer looks at him wearily. "Those wolf-people are just a myth, Lloyd. I mean come on, do you really believe in people turning into wolves with magic? Beings that live in the forest with nothing more than the clothes they make out of the hunt? People who live in packs and have a language of only howling? Do you hear yourself? You must have went overboard on the drinks last night 'cause you're not talking sense!" The customer squeaked through his laughter. The shopkeeper thought for a minute. "Guess you must be right Mack, but what if they did exist?"

Moon light glimmers through the snow covered trees as a 14 year old kid is running through the forest at an alarming speed that one would not think a person that size could manage. Behind them is a band of armed men running nowhere near the same speed. The men are shouting at the kid to stop and allow being turned back into the authorities, yet they're still running. One of the men finally catches them, but as he gets ready to shoot, a poof of red cloud blocks his vision. When it finally clears, he is met face to face with a fierce creature with glowing red eyes and a low growl. He slowly feels for the weapon he dropped, but it is nowhere to be found. With out a moment's notice, the beast dashes off into the night leaving the man with only one thing to say. "We will get you wolf-walker, and we will find the rest of them too. You hear me!" The wolf did hear, but they didn't mind. Humans won't ever know the full power of the wolf, only the fur, claws, and bite.

The night is long and cold, but this wolf's fur is thicker and fluffier than a typical wolf. They're glad that the storm had come, it was covering the wolf's tracks. Even though the wolf could survive the storm, they needed to get shelter. The realization of how much pain they were in had started to kick in. Breaking out of that cage and running nonstop for five miles took a lot out of them. Their decision was impossible. It was either they howl to the others for help and risk the humans finding the pack or look for a quick shelter and let the wounds get worse from the wet cold. After a minute they decided to find a hiding place, losing the pack was not an option! The hunt for shelter was on, but luckily for the wolf, they know someone who can help.

After two miles of walking, the wolf could smell him. The scent of Columbian spices and fresh baked goods comforted the tired wolf. They turned the corner and followed the sent to a house. It was three stories tall, had white walls, and built next to the river. Getting over the river would be a bit of a challenge, but once over it, the wolf would have warm food and a comfortable place to stay. How did they know? The humans that live here have gotten quite use to the wolf's visits, for this isn't the first time the wolf needed their help. The wolf had to turn back into a human form before they could ask for shelter.

They were just about to turn back when a sound hit their ears. A horrible blasting sound of a gun being shot into the air. The men were back, and by the sound of it, they had more guns and more of them.

The wolf needed a way out of this. They needed a key but what? Thats when it hit them. Key. The wolf looked more like a wolf-dog than an actual wolf. Their curly red fur and short round body was perfect for this situation. After explaining to the family what they needed, they got to work. The wolf was going to be their 'pet', and when the men came, they, the family, would claim that they always had two dogs, Golden and the wolf. It was a perfect plan.

BANG BANG! The man who owned the house, Walter Clark, answered the door. The wolf went upstairs with Walter's grandson, for the two of them wanted to listen to the conversation from there. The plan was working! Walter said, " those wolf people are just a myth I tell you. You men are crazy, and I should know, I've lived down here my whole life!" The men finally agreed with him and left after a good 30 minutes of arguing.

The wolf could finally relax even though it had already started to. They looked over to the grandson and smiled. He was the first person ever to show the wolf what compassion was. The wolf loved him more than anything, and they never hesitated to show it. They always wondered if he shared the same feelings, for they were both male. He noticed that the wolf was staring at him and sighed deeply. "Next time Robyn, when you want something from a human, just ask me for it," said Walter's grandson. "Sorry Key, I just wanted blueberry pie. Can you make me some pie?" Key let out another annoyed sigh, but he smiled and nodded.

Student Name: Jaqueline Martinez
Grade: 10
School: Deer Park High School-S Campus
Title: Apology
Category: Poetry
Key: Silver Key
Educator:

I am sorry for the way I have treated you all these years.

I'm sorry for grabbing your glass heart and shattering it to a million pieces.

You trusted me.

You needed me.

I turned my back on you thinking it a defensive mechanism. I turned my back on you because I was scared.

I'm admitting too late that I was afraid: Afraid of the world, of our family, of our friendships. I was afraid of myself.

I knew I should've been better. I knew I should've guided you through a garden full of roses, not this prickly path full of nails.

I'm sorry. I'm sorry for all I've done. I wish I could make your path easier.

I wish we didn't turn out like this. I wish we could've ended on better terms.

I was so scared of being like them that I didn't realize how much more damage I did by behaving the way I did.

It's astonishing that something we both have in common is the constant desire and search to be acknowledged by people who will never learn to appreciate the things we give them.

We continue to make up for the way we are when we shouldn't feel the need to.

All of our lives, both you and I, have seen and said and done things that weren't okay. We have experienced things that molded us into the people we are today. Not because we wanted to adapt. Not because it was what everyone was doing in our lives. But because we had to.

How can you survive in an environment that is not clearly not good for you without changing some things about yourself?

How can you say you're still the same person when you don't even know what you had for dinner last night?

The things that happened weren't your fault. You're never responsible for the mistakes of others, and I need you to understand that. I know we both are very different people, but unlike me, you managed to remain the same. Crazy how stubborn you can be sometimes. Stubborn to change but change in ways you don't realize. Stubborn to love but have friendships that last for years. Stubborn to hold your tongue but scream in silence when in difficult situations. It's okay. Being stubborn isn't rebellious or moody. It's a good thing too, remember that.

Learn to hold your own hand and learn to be defensive, because this life is too hard for us to continue being sweet and vulnerable. Toughen your shell, toughen your words. Sharpen the swords we were given at a young age. Use the wisdom we fought tooth and nail to have. I'll continue looking for our answers as I get older.

I promised you things won't always be this way. I promise that we won't be this way forever.

To my inner child

Student Name: Madilyn Arriazola
Grade: 8
School: Deer Park Junior High School
Title: Benefits of Pet Therapy
Category: Critical Essay
Key: Silver Key
Educator: Madeline Cornelius

Ears perked up and tail wagging makes for a happy pup! Have you ever wondered why people use animals in healthcare facilities? Dogs, cats, horses, and other animals can be used for so many other purposes than just being a pet. Pet therapy has been reported to have a positive impact on health outcomes. I mean how does it make you feel when your pet is excited to see you? Every time I see my Maltipoo it makes me feel so happy.

Pet therapy can be used in various settings from pediatrics to geriatrics. Therapy animals may visit people in hospitals, nursing homes, and schools (Perkins, 2020). For example a golden retriever attends my school to visit and interact with the students brightening their day. "According to Florence Nightingale, in the late 19th century, a small pet animal is often an excellent companion for the sick, for long chronic cases specifically" (Mulvaney-Roth, et al., 2022). A small pet would be less of a burden on the person. Florence Nightingale "The Lady with the Lamp" was the founder of modern nursing, served as a manager and trainer of nurses during the Crimean War (History, 2023). Studies have shown dogs are useful to sick individuals by decreasing stress, improving mood, and can minimize worries (Ingram & Cohen-Filipic, 2019). When people interact with dogs, they notice a social connection between themselves and the dog. Walking through the door after a long day of school and seeing my Maltipoo wag her tail while running up to me makes all my negative emotions go away.

One study found patients who pet their dog lowered their blood pressure and had a greater survival rate if they were to have a heart attack (Mulvaney-Roth, et al., 2022). The calmness of having their dog/pets around controls their stress. "The American Heart Association has concluded that pet ownership (particularly dogs) is probably associated with reduced risk for cardiovascular disease" (Ingram & Cohen-Filipic, 2019). Pet therapy is also used with people who have cancer and chronic fatigue syndrome (tiredness and increased sleep). So when you start to feel sick you can rely on your pet to help you recover and make sure that you're good. The advantage of having a pet with these health conditions is that the pet provides companionship and affection, but the disadvantage increases the persons fatigue while caring for their pet (Ingram & Cohen-Filipic, 2019). These patients would benefit having a lap dog to decrease the maintenance of caring for the pet.

The biggest impact of having an animal used for pet therapy is improving your health. Any animal can be beneficial in pet therapy. It is amazing what these animals can provide for us humans. Lowering blood pressure, increasing mood, decreasing stress, and minimizing worries are all benefits of pet therapy. With these benefits we should have more pets helping out in our schools, hospitals, and nursing homes to help out with people's health care. Considering all of the remarkable benefits, why wouldn't we have pet therapy offered in as many establishments as possible?

Student Name: Janessa Campos
Grade: 8
School: Deer Park Junior High School
Title: Controversy
Category: Critical Essay
Key: Silver Key
Educator: Madeline Cornelius

Between celebrities, there will always be conflicts. No matter if they are big or small, they each have an impact in society. Some will last a few days, months, or even a year. Coincidentally, this controversy has lasted 14 years!

The MTV Video Music Awards is an assembly where the MTV channel represents the best artists for their music videos and achievements. What makes these awards special is that a majority of fans are the voters. The Video Music awards have been an annual event since 1984; making it a well-known event.

The 2009 MTV Video Music Awards occurred on September 13, 2009. It is still spoken about now in 2023. An appalling event took place on that very night; between two very famous artists. Taylor Swift and Kanye West. All of this commotion was all due to Beyoncé not winning an award. Taylor Swift won an award for the best female music video award for "You Belong With Me." Kanye strongly disagreed with the fact that Taylor won. Kanye's infamous words were, "I'm really happy for you. I'm gonna let you finish, but Beyoncé had one of the best videos of all time." (Referring to the song Single Ladies) Taylor stood there in shock of what had just occurred. Along with 19 year old Taylor, all of the other celebrities did the same. Beyoncé began to cry for Taylor knowing that this was an extremely special moment for her. Turns out that Beyoncé did win an award for single ladies, and out of sorrow, she gave up her speech so Taylor could have hers. As they both began to have watery eyes, you can just see Kanye sitting in his seat wondering on how much this could effect his career, and reputation.

Now you may be wondering about the media's response to this, well, it immediately blew up! The moment became so popular that when you type in "VMA's" in Google, Kanye West and Taylor Swift appear in the recommended bar. But most importantly, Kanye's response to the whole outbreak. All over articles, radios stations, talk shows, and in the

music industry. The song, "Famous" on the album "The Life of Pablo" by Kanye West was written to diss Taylor Swift. The lyrics stated, "I made her famous, I made her famous." However, those were not the original lyrics. Before editing his song, the lyrics were "I made her famous, not really but somewhat famous." Concluding that he helped her reach where she is now, but it isn't anything compared to him. Some may say Kanye helped her reach her goal, but Taylor didn't deserve it. Others say that Kanye's speech and his help did nothing to Taylor, and it was because of the work she put in.

To this day, this outbreak is still spoken about. The fights over who is right and wrong are continuous. An audio used by many Kanye fans on TikTok says, "I hate Taylor" and continues to play "Stronger" by Kanye West while the creator makes fun of Taylor. In the comment sections of the videos, you can see the opinions of Taylor fans and Kanye fans, including some on both sides. Most of the comments are along the words of, "Am I the only one who likes both?"; "He did make her famous though."; "Why are we still talking about this 14 years later?" The media shows to have different responses on the situation. There has not been a single agreement on whether or not Kanye did the right thing.

Student Name: Sean Runchey
Grade: 10
School: Deer Park High School-S Campus
Title: Down into the Deep
Category: Poetry
Key: Silver Key
Educator: Amani Stephens

On the shore I bask in joy;
Wrapped in the sun's radiant ploy.
But all around are things I wish I knew—
An endless absence of black and blue.

Every night I gaze at the shore,
Wanting, yet never reaching for more.
But tonight, that changes and I shall dive;
To uncover the truth and feel alive.

Now I go down into the deep,
And all I find is the joy that I reap.
I'd have to sell my soul to see the bottom.
My heart'd be black, my mind in autumn.

Deeper down: the world gets darker.
The truth's thicker; breathing harder.
I turned my back to Helios to search for Apollo.
But down here it's so dark; I don't know what to follow.

The light I threw away

Haunts me night and day.

I keep diving—driving this stake into my gut.

I swim to keep the loss from tearing me up.

Down in the depths there are no beating hearts

No medicine to mend a man of sinewed parts;

Parts of a thing not yet whole.

Who searches for that light he paid as toll.

I lost my light and my love,

To understand the folly of an ignorant shove.

To learn the truth many have yet to confess.

So now I warn you, listen well to what I profess:

To drink from God's hand,

To know what is not known on land,

Is to accept his bitter gift of madness,

And doom yourself to wallow in its emptiness.

Before you go, weigh out your joy.

Do not repeat the folly of the ignorant boy.

And discard of that which was given at birth

And leave the purity of earth.

For understanding has its price.

Its weight in gold and in rice.

And when our requiem bells toll,

We may only bring what we can hold.

Student Name: Abigail Wilson
Grade: 8
School: Deer Park Junior High School
Title: Fell For It
Category: Flash Fiction
Key: Silver Key
Educator: Madeline Cornelius

In the darkness, cruising down the road, I quickly swallow 2 Advil pills. Without water, I might add. The bitter taste coats the insides of my cheeks as I wince. Anything's better than this horrible headache I've acquired from 6 beers and 2 shots. No one's around, so I run the small red octagon with words my blurry vision can't make out. I suddenly hear an ear splitting howl, along with the overload of red, white, and blue lights.

"Crap," I spit out as I blatantly realize that I'm being pulled over. All I can see is a blocky figure stepping out of what looks like a Madison County patrol car. "I've got a code 390 off of Viviana avenue," she speaks into the receiver. I watch as she clomps her thick boots on the hot pavement. She taps on the center of my tempered glass windows. I slowly roll down the window of my 2007 Toyota Camry as I think of ways I can manipulate my way out of this. "Officer Juliana Palermo, license and registration and step out of the vehicle. NOW please." Woah. Even the urgency in her voice makes me think that this will be the easiest mess to pick up. "I'm sorry, I thought I said NOW!" She snaps. "Okay, okay. I'm coming." I step out of the car, and reply, "Driver and pull-over victim, Joshua Larsen." I state, with a sly grin plastered across my face. She violently rolls her eyes at my joke.

"Where's your license and registration, Mr. Larsen? I thought that was one of the few things I asked for when I tapped on your window. Or did you just happen to forget because you're so intoxicated?" I cringe at her word choice. She can probably smell the gross stench of stale beer. Or is it really that obvious? "I'll grab it." I have a plan to get out of this. I slide into the drivers seat and quickly slam the door in hopes to out-drive this mess. Instead, the door won't shut.

I search around to see what's wrong and slowly discover that Officer Kill-joy here has jabbed her boot in between the door and the car. It's almost as if she knew what was coming. "Okay, we're going to do this the right way or the hard way. Am I clear?" She loudly states. "As mud, ma'am." I jokingly reply. "Okay sir, I need you to step out of the vehicle and come with me." She tells me. "We're going to take a little ride down to the station." No. No, no, no. I can't go back to prison. I've been in there because of DWI before, but only for a few months. I can imagine it will be just a little bit longer this time.

“Hello? Why aren’t you getting out of your car?” Officer Palermo wonders. “I- I can’t go back to that place,” I fake say in hopes she’ll feel bad for me and let me go. Just as I think I’ve got her in the palm of my hand, she firmly remarks, “If you don’t stop talking then that might be the last place you’ll ever go.” Oof. Straight blow to the stomach. I give in and step out of the car. She carefully cuffs me, my skin shivering as her hands brush mine. And just like that, it hits me. Smack in the middle of my mind, I suddenly know how to get myself out of this situation. I just have to get her to fall for me. I turn and give her a soft smile that she returns. “Whatever you’re going for won’t work.” She says. “What do you mean? Just some harmless fun!” I say with a tone that sounds way too fake. “Harmless fun is what got you pulled over sir. Let’s not go down that path again.” Well, she’s not wrong. We cruise all the way down to the station, and she places me in an interrogation room. She begins the questions while I mindlessly pick at my fingernails. “So, where did you start drinking tonight, Mr. Larsen?” She wonders. “At the local bar down the road from my house, Martini’s.” I reply. I look dead into her eyes as I quietly say, “I could take you there on a weekend when you’re off call.” She smiles but quickly corrects herself into a serious face. “Sir, you aren’t going to get out of this by flirting with me.” She speaks almost as if that’s not what she wants to say. “You may get somewhere, but it’s not going to be out.” Bingo. That’s how I know this is working.

“It could be out though, if you just gave me a chance.” I pry. “I ... I would sir, but I would get fired. Plus, it wouldn’t be the first time.” What? What is that supposed to mean? “Well if this isn’t the first time, you should know how not to get caught, huh?” Already, I’m thinking of what could happen. She will aimlessly fall for me, unaware of what I’m plotting. I’ll manipulate her into bailing me, and then I’ll never see her sorry excuse of a cop again. I smirk at my thoughts. She steps out of the room after returning my smirk. I take that as a good sign, until a group of deputies barge in and say “Sir, we’re going to have to transfer you to the national prison. You’ve suffered an offense of coaxing a certified officer. You’ll probably be locked up for a while.” What? I thought she was falling! Instead I was naïve enough to fall into her stupid trap. You’d never think someone could put on such a show.

Student Name: Taylor Nixon
Grade: 8
School: Fairmont Junior High School
Title: Havasupai Village
Category: Personal Essay & Memoir
Key: Silver Key
Educator: Lisa Diaz

Standing at the edge of a cliff, looking out at the hundred-foot waterfall below me, all I could think about was everything that could go wrong. About three days prior, my mom, my two brothers, and I had hiked thirteen miles down the Grand Canyon and set up camp in the Havasupai Village. Everything was so pretty there. The water was as clear as the blue sky on a hot summer day, the trees were perfectly shading the ground we were standing on, and everything was just so beautiful! When we were getting ready to hike down this waterfall, I was really worried because I am very scared of heights and was about to let my fear cause me to sit out on all the amazing views and memories. The way down to the waterfall is not like anyway anyone would be expecting; it is not like a staircase or anything normal. There were huge rocks to climb over and tunnels to crawl through because they were not big enough to stand up in, plus about 40 ft in the air there were ladders to climb down. The ladders were covered in bright green algae that was growing on them and they were wet from the mist from the waterfall.

Once the climb started, like I said I was scared but still willing to go for the experience. The start of the hike did not seem like it was going to be bad because all the paths had ropes on the sides so nobody would fall, but towards the end that was not the case.

After the cute little paths we got to follow, then came the hard-core stuff. Our crew got to crawl through tunnels, and it wasn't as bad as one would think, more of a "duck your head and waddle through the dark till you see the light from the other side." Even though we had zero flashlights, because we didn't know that we were supposed to bring them, it wasn't as bad as it seemed. More of an escape

from the heat really. When we got to the third and last tunnel, it was longer than the other two, but we still got out fine. Then we realized what we were really in for.

Finally, after all the paths, and all the tunnels, we made it to the bad part of the ladders. This step was by far the hardest part of the whole process. After the last tunnel there was a little flat part that could hold maybe ten people. Travis, my brother, was the first to go down, being the most adventurous one in our family. Ty, my other brother was next, then me, and bringing of the rear, my mom. About three-fourths of the way down

was the end of the first ladder. There was a big gap for me, and I had to lower myself with my arms. I looked down and Ty and Travis were already at the bottom waiting for my mom and me. By the end of the second ladder, I was freezing. Mascara had run all the way down my face, but finally I made it to the bottom.

Once my feet hit the ground, I was the first to run and jump into the crystal-clear water. I thought about how amazing it felt. Even though the water was pretty much freezing it was still the highlight of the whole trip. Looking back on my time in the Havasupai Falls, I don't think it could've gotten any better. If I ever do this hike again it will most definitely be when I am older so I can let my kids enjoy it too!

Student Name: Brenna Bockmiller
Grade: 8
School: Fairmont Junior High School
Title: Lights; Memories; Show time
Category: Personal Essay & Memoir
Key: Silver Key
Educator: Teresa Spencer

It has been said, "Sometimes you will never know the value of a moment until it becomes a memory." There are some memories you have in life that you remember forever. Those special moments you lock in a chest. This was one of those chest moments. I loved every minute of this labor of love. Being a part of the Little Women cast for UIL last year was, by far, my most treasured adventures in theatre.

Getting ready for the show was eventful and rigorous to the point of exhaustion. Long rehearsals, hours of blocking, learning lines, endless stage directions, infinite costume changes, and the list goes on and on. Listening to music, makeup carefully applied on faces, and costumes flying everywhere. The chaos really helped us bond as a team. Soon, we all became as thick as thieves. These are relationships that have been forged in the fire for life.

The moment of truth has finally arrived. Standing on stage with my mind spinning, I am frozen in place. But with a seven-minute setup, there is no time to waste. Heavy furniture moving, props sliding out from everywhere, the minutes are ticking away. But luckily, we set our stage in time. Now it is time to perform. Our moment has arrived. No turning back now! As they say... Regardless of all the headaches and/or heartaches, on November 4th, Fairmont theatre was ready! Time to "Break a Leg!"

My heart felt like it was beating out of my chest; I was so anxious. Curtains opened and lights up. Saige and I started the first scene. It was a little rocky to get into the rhythm at first, and I was visibly shaking. Still, I was soaking up the moment. I was reveling in the heat of the shining bright lights beaming straight into my eyes almost blinding me. However, looking out and seeing all those faces was priceless.

As we continued, the lines flowed, and it all became second nature. I became calm and went through the adventure of the play. Pretending to slay dragons, going to a ball, and meeting my true love, fighting my sisters, everything was an emotional rollercoaster, especially knowing it was my last time to perform the play. I fed off of the audiences' laughter and applause because I love getting a reaction out of people. It's the electricity I need to keep breathing. The crew and cast that I was a part of were amazing and I am

forever grateful. We sang, laughed, and cried together. Seeing those fellow guys and girls kill it on, and off stage, filled my heart to the point of overflowing.

In the end, it was bittersweet to recall the memories knowing that it was all coming to an end. Tears were rolling down my cheeks as I said my final line. The waterfall of emotions flooded through my entire body as the crowd stood to applaud. Pure joy filled me to the point of bursting! Now that was definitely one of those chest moments that I will keep always cherish.

Student Name: Angel Avila
Grade: 8
School: Deepwater Junior High School
Title: Lost without you
Category: Poetry
Key: Silver Key
Educator: Sarah Renfro

Lost without you

It has been three years.

I have been waiting for you to come back.

But once I saw I lost you I tried not to go back.

I fight my feelings I have been striving every day.

Fighting my feelings while I am sitting here.

Alone like any other day.

I sit here thinking.

overthinking my feelings.

Try to think of happier days.

But my feeling gets the best of me.

I cannot withstand this pain.

I got this weird feeling in my brain.

Like I am lost in this empty plain.

Cmon tell me do you think I am going insane.

It has been three years come on you think I would just forget about you.

You were the love of my life I can stand to be without you.

I cry thinking about you every day.

Thinking if you would have thought to stay.

But no, you just left me.

Could not even say goodbye to my face.

I keep thinking it is my fault.

I blame myself because you are gone.

I tried to hug you.

But you just pushed me away.

But I hope you know I will never forget that day.

I hope you know I loved everything about you.

I hope you know I always visit your grave.

I've been trying to get you out of the frame.

Look I am just saying.

These past three years have been extremely hard on me.

Been going through depression but for once.

Some people care about me.

I'm getting better.

But this is my message to you.

I really love you.

I just wish I could be with you for one more day.

I wish I could see your beautiful emerald, green eyes.

Kiss your face one more time.

Every day I sit here like I'm dying.

Think that I have been lying to myself.

The last thing I said to you was something I really regret.

I just really want to try to forget that.

I cry and cry and stress every day.

My anxiety messes with me.

I am not so social as I used to be.

I tried to find another girl like you.

But all they did was cheat.

So, I go to you I talk to you.

I start praying on my knees.

Begging and begging just so you can give me a sign that your alive.

Please just show me.

I will never believe you're gone.

Student Name: London King
Grade: 9
School: Deer Park High School-N Campus
Title: My Form of Art
Category: Poetry
Key: Silver Key
Educator:

My form of art grows from my roots
with its coiled up texture.
My form of roots comes from my DNA,
it's beautiful complexion that
gives me awe and obsession.
Now don't get it twisted, these roots don't come
from trees ; they just hang from them.
Nah, see MY roots are MY form of art.

My form of art is the beautiful baked
Mac N cheese served with a side of collard greens
that's served full of love from grandma's kitchen.

Nah, see MY form of art can sometimes be seen as a weapon,
but the way I see it, its a culture I'd like to call heaven.
Nah see MY form of art you'd only understand if you
look at your hands and seen the pain from the grass
and the lands. See nah,
My form or art comes from the heart and builds from the hurt,
painted from the blood, watered by the tears from when you think back
and relive those years.

See nah, MY form of art grows from my roots, painted by the blood,
and watered by the tears from the pain THEY caused US back in all those years.

My culture is my art and its roots grew stronger during its
400 years of ignorance and photosynthesis.

See this, hear this, but you won't feel this until you walked
in this pair of socks, that's stopped by that blue and red and
tainted by the cops.

Understand,

MY form of art grows from MY roots.

Understand,

My culture isn't something you can tear down

In order to FEEL LIKE you've lifted YOURSELF UP

Nah,

You stand there and feel like you've shut us down

But with the power in our crown we SHUT YOU UP

Oh but not with our hands,

not with our "weapons" oh not that

But with the integrity of our voice, the power in our spirit.

We shut you down with the calmness in

response to your ignorance

We shut you down with the education that you didn't believe

WE could have

Think that because we love for our chains to shine,

The shoes with the Nike signs, that our intelligence has lustered

because our bling didn't.

Nah, see MY form of art is a family grown through shed
blood, not shared.

Understand, MY form of art grows from my roots
and they refuse to be ripped out the ground.

Student Name: Jaden Willis
Grade: 11
School: Deer Park High School-S Campus
Title: My Mother; My Enemy
Category: Short Story
Key: Silver Key
Educator: Denee Espree

My eyes blink open.

Faintly, I can hear the theme song from one of my favorite sitcoms floating from the hallway. This is the first sign that I am dreaming—that show hasn't been on the air in years.

I slide my blanket off and sit up, pressing my feet into the cold wooden floor. I stand up, and with a shiver, grab a cardigan off a nearby chair and walk into the living room.

My mother sits on the couch, a mug clasped tightly between her hands. Her hair is pulled back into a simple ponytail, having been burnt straight from years of chemical treatments. The black glasses she wears are balanced on the tip of her nose, and her eyebrows are furrowed tightly.

This is the second sign that I am dreaming. She was buried last night.

"Mom," I call out, voice shaky.

She glances at me and waves her hand. "Come on. Sit."

I take a few tentative steps and settle on the couch next to her. We're both silent for a few moments. In times like these, I never know what to say. It's like one of those video games my son likes to play, where you have to choose between multiple dialogue options. One achieves the mission, and the other one leaves a permanent scar on the run through. In all forty years of living, I haven't figured out the formula that works.

Suddenly, the couch I'm sitting on transforms from a nice grey suede to a dingy leather brown. I look around, flabbergasted—this isn't my home anymore.

It's my childhood one.

The old sitcom suddenly fits in with the boxy television, aged knickknacks, and dated magazines littering the TV stand. On the coffee table, there's a frame of me at one of the first Thanksgivings I remember. I reach out to take the frame from the coffee table, eager to revisit precious childhood memories, but my hand passes through it.

"Do you remember," Mom suddenly begins, "when you used to sit on the floor in front of me, and we'd struggle through your hair every Sunday evening?"

A comb appears on the coffee table. I'm familiar with it—it's met my neck many times when she got tired of me crying.

"You threatened to shave all my hair off."

Mom chuckles lightly. "Threatened. My momma was meaner than me. One day, I was fussing so much she cut off a chunk in the back just to prove that she could do it."

Another frame materializes on the coffee table. In the picture, a younger version of my mom smiles brightly with a woman. My grandma. She died when I was too young to remember her, too young to care about death. All I know about her comes from the stories my uncle tells me—that she was a stubborn bull of a woman. That she didn't care about emotions, or affection, or anything that didn't pay the bills.

"You never told me," I whisper. "About your childhood, I mean."

"There wasn't much to talk about." Mom uncrosses and recrosses her legs. "I was poor. Not that smart, but I could hold a job. Got pregnant with your brother at seventeen, got kicked out, and ended up passing him off to my aunt while I worked."

Aiden, my older brother, was the sole reason she was so passionate about waiting until marriage.

“You think these older boys care about you?” She’d scold. “You think they won’t knock you up and leave you high and dry? Ask me where your daddy is. Ask why he hasn’t bought you any birthday presents or Christmas gifts. Be careful before you throw your life away.”

In hindsight, the advice was sound. It made sense, but that didn’t make it any better when it stopped you from going on dates and talking about boys with your friends. My mother never understood the difference between holding hands and letting a boy between your legs. All of it, she decided, was the gateway drug into becoming a teenage mom with no degree.

“Why did grandma kick you out?”

“She was angry.” Mom sets her mug on the table and fully faces me. “It made her look dumb, me having a kid. People always said stuff about her working so much and never being at home. That she didn’t know how to watch her own kids, being a single mom and all.”

“That’s not your fault,” I interject.

“It didn’t have to be. A baby still costs too much, and I refused to get a job at first because I thought it’d be too stressful. She didn’t want anything to do with it.”

The next item to appear on the coffee table is a box of cigarettes.

“You did the same thing to me, remember?” I point to the offending item. “I was sixteen. You were looking through my room and found them, so you locked me out.”

“For a night.”

“It was December,” I argue. “I nearly froze to death.”

She shrugs. “You never did it again, did you? I know how that shit starts—you borrow a cigarette from a friend, then it’s weed at a party, and then—”

“I didn’t stop smoking because it was bad, or because it’d turn me into a crackhead,” I hiss. “I stopped because it turned you into a raging psychopath!”

“That victim mentality is what made you drop out of college.” A smirk curls on her face. It is not humorous, or snarky. It’s vindicating. “You ran off somewhere five states away and drowned because I wasn’t there to keep you in line. I wasn’t there to guide you—”

“You didn’t guide me!” Not once while she was alive did I ever raise my voice at her like this. “When I broke something as a little kid, you never told me why it was bad—you just hit me. When I failed a test, you never told me to work hard, you just took away my bedroom door so that you could always see if I was studying. When I called you because I was on academic probation and needed someone to talk to me, someone to look at me and not just treat me like a number, you shamed me!”

“My entire life,” I continue, “I’ve been fighting to prove that I’m not you. That you made it, somehow. That your pain wasn’t all for nothing, because at least your kids grew up to have better life than you did—”

“And you went back and got your degree, didn’t you?” Mom doesn’t yell. Her quiet, stern voice fills up the entire room. “You married a doctor. You have a two-story home and two kids. Your daughter is in dance. Your son plays football. Do you think you’d have any of that if I’d let you run around and do whatever?”

“I’m forty.” The fight, just as quickly as it escalated, leaks out of my shoulders and settles into a puddle on the ground. “I bought that house two years ago. I almost got divorced three times because I couldn’t get my act together. The life I have right now is

in spite of you. I only achieved what I have by unlearning all the toxicity that you passed on to me.”

Silence settles on the couch between us, tossing an arm behind my head and wrapping around my mouth. My mother’s lips are tightly pressed together, unwilling to engage with the points I’ve made.

“I think that you believe that if you acknowledge what your mother did to you, it’d make you weak,” I say. “You did it to me because you believed that abuse made you strong. You believe that yelling and hitting made you impenetrable. But I didn’t bury you last night because you were too strong. I buried you because you worked yourself to death, got diagnosed with cancer, and continued to work. You were obsessed with earning money you didn’t spend. You hated vacations and leisure so you didn’t see your family much outside of the holidays. All that time you devoted to your job meant nothing in the end. You can’t cash a check in heaven.”

A photo materializes on the coffee table. Somehow, I know that it’s the last item to appear. There’s no frame—it’s simply a picture of me and my kids from Christmas two years ago.

“You blame me,” Mom states. “I get it. I deserve it, most likely. I blamed my mother for a lot of the things I went through too. Then she died, and I realized that she was a human being. A deeply flawed, emotionally unstable human being. The same way that I did things without thinking, the same way I disregarded the feelings of others without caring, she did too. We both made mistakes, but I loved her a little bit more for them once I realized I’d never see her again.”

“You’ll reach that point,” she continues. “In a week. A month. A decade. You’ll make some of the mistakes that I made, some new ones, but for the most part you’ll be better. Your daughter will hate you for your flaws, and then love you because at least you tried. She’ll do the same to her daughter, but she’ll be better than you. It’s a cycle. A curse, too—but one that wanes a bit with each generation.”

“I never hated you,” I defend. “Sometimes, I feel like you hated me. No—that you didn’t like me.”

"I always loved you."

"I said like. I know that you would do anything for me. That you'd never let me starve. But if I was a stranger on the street, would you think of me kindly? If I was just a woman instead of your daughter, would you be impressed?"

Mom stands and moves to kneel in front of me. "If you were just a woman, I'd be in awe of that woman. If you were a stranger, I'd be glad to have met such a person. No matter who you are, and no matter what you've done, you will always be one of my best accomplishments."

Tears fall from my eyes, but I don't wipe them. I stand, wishing to hug her, but I fear that I'd wake up if I moved too fast.

We both walk back to my bedroom. Like a child, I crawl under the blankets and look at her. Mom pulls them up, tucks them tight, and presses a kiss to my forehead.

When I wake up, I cry.

Student Name: Rylie McDonough
Grade: 8
School: J P Bonnette Jr High School
Title: Oh; How Rumors Fly
Category: Novel Writing
Key: Silver Key
Educator: Angela Nelson

Oh how rumors fly; Chapter 1: Madalyn Jill

She was a wonderful liar. She lied about caring, about what she was doing, where she was, and who she was. She did not just lie to me, she lied to everyone, she had us looking like fools at her feet.

Ok so maybe I should rewind a bit for all y'all reading this. I'm Madalyn Jill, MJ for short. And my best friend for like forever just ruined my life.

Her name is Melany Maralyn. I told her everything my favorite color, food, subject, people, and even the drama going on, but most importantly I told her who I had a crush on. I have had the biggest crush on Andrew Cruz. Some things you should know about him are he goes by Cruz, he plays football and soccer, I have known him since pre-k, and Melany stole him from me.

Me and Melany have been friends or so I thought for 10 years. But it seems like we just met. I'm not a jealous person but something about them together just ticks me off.

It started about a month ago, when Cruz asked for a pencil. He tapped her on the shoulder with a big smile and asked, "hey, do you have a pencil I could use," of course I say I do, but he just looked at me. She gave him a pencil and glared at him for a second, but I didn't think anything would be going on in between them.

That same day I went over to her house and hung out, but she kind of just brushed me off the whole time, so I left her room and went to the kitchen. I ran into her brother who's had a crush on me since who knows when. He asked if I wanted to watch a movie and I asked

Melany if she wanted to and she said, “yeah just let me invite someone else over.” and of freaking course it was Cruz.

I was so upset, I ran to bathroom and started sobbing. Her brother ran after me and convinced me to just come out of the restroom and go watch the movie. I came out, and he wiped the tears rolling down my cheek with his sleeve. He walked next to me as we walked into the living room. We sat on the couch, I was at one end and Melany was at the other, Cruz was right next to her and like 5 inches away from me was her brother, Seth.

We decided to watch a scary movie that wasn't even scary more so funny, but Melany always jumped whenever she got the chance so that Cruz would comfort her. I hated it, so I left, I lived about a 4 mile walk home, but I didn't care. I got up, looked at her and stormed out. While I was walking out, I heard her say “she's been obsessed with you for like years now, and she's so weird I don't know why she hangs out with me.” After that I heard Seth yell something, but I couldn't make out the words. As I'm leaving, I felt a soft, warm hand on my shoulder, I looked back stupidly hoping it was Cruz. It was not Cruz, but it was Seth. It still made me happy that someone came after me. He offered to walk me home, I said no, I didn't feel like being around people. He agreed but told me to text him as soon as I got home, just to make sure I got home safely.

He was always sweet like that; he has the heart of a saint. Btu I could never like him, he was my best friend's brother. It would be weird, right?

The next day at school, I kept getting weird glances like I was a monster of some sort. Seth came up to me and started questioning me like crazy. Melany told everyone I liked her boyfriend and that I tried to steal him from her. I'm so done with her.

Ok, ok I know she made me seem like a totally crap friend but only part of that is true. Me and MJ have been friends since pre-k, and we have both had a crush on the same dude since we met. I started liking him the year before pre-k, daycare. MJ was the new student and sat alone all the time, so I started talking to her and we became friends. She said she met a guy and that she was going to try and become his friend, they were friends up until 4 years ago. She told him how she felt, and he got weirded out and just stopped talking to her.

Well, he and I started being friends in daycare. We have been hanging out a lot more though recently and it started like 9 months ago. Around a month ago he asked me for a pencil in math and well I gave him a pencil and gazed at him for a minute. He came up to me later that day and asked me to be his girlfriend, of course I said yes. The same day MJ came over without notice and acted like I was going to stop what I was doing just to hang out with her. You might be wondering what I was doing, I was Texting Cruz because he and I were planning to hang out later in the day.

She got upset and went to the kitchen where my brother who's in love with her was, and he asked us to come watch a movie. She asked me if I wanted to, and I said yeah and I asked if I could invite someone over. So, I invited Cruz over, that was how I was going to tell MJ me and him were dating. She got upset, and while we were watching the movie, she kept looking at me and him next to each other and rolling her eyes. Of course, it was upsetting seeing her upset, but can you blame me for taking a chance with my crush? You can't. I got scared cause we were watching a scary movie, and I jumped a bit, and he held my hand, she got jealous and stormed out. When she left, Cruz got up and said, "It's so obvious she has a crush on me, she's so weird I dint know why you hang out with her." Seth yelled something I can't exactly remember what but then he ran after her.

The next day I heard people talking about MJ, saying she was obsessed and crazy. Of course, she thought it was me, but I swear it wasn't. Seth was talking to her, and she just kept giving me dirty looks. And I've stopped feeling bad about it, I mean not fully but I feel less bad now than I did before. Me and Cruz have now been dating for 1 month as of last week.

Yeah, whatever I didn't even create the roomer, I mean yeah, I said she was weird but she's not crazy. She's sweet and kind and I'm kind of jealous of her and Melany being so close and her and Seth getting along so well, but I would never say she was crazy. Honestly if I tell you, promise you won't say anything? Fine, I've had the biggest crush on MJ since like 3rd grade. I just recently started to realize how much I really do, and I wanted to get her attention. I started dating Melany like a month, I honestly kind of regret when I stopped being friends with MJ, I just didn't know how to express myself well.

But here's how I remember that day, I was in math class, my least favorite class ever, both Melany and MJ sitting in front of me, I had one of my headphones in, but I didn't have a pencil. I tapped on Melany's shoulder and asked her for a pencil, when Mj turned around and it looked like it was in slow-mo. It was beautiful, I kind of gazed at her for a minute, but then I remembered why I tapped on Melany's shoulder, and I snapped out of it. So then fast forward it right before last period and I see Melany and I get an overwhelming feeling to ask her out, so I did, and she said yes.

So, it's after school and I'm texting Melany and she asks me to come over and watch a movie, I agree but like I didn't know that Mj was going to be over there. I get there and sit on the couch, when suddenly Mj gets up and runs to the restroom before the movie even started. A part of me wanted to chase after her but the other part didn't want to make Melany upset, so I stayed with Melany. Of course Seth ran after her I mean he was in love with her, he brought her back to the living room and the movie started. I kept looking over to Seth and Mj sitting next to each other, he was so lucky to be close to her. He's a freak honestly, he's weird he's always talking about insects and robots. Anyways, Melany jumped, and I got a bit scared from the movie, so I grabbed her hand and held it, then Mj got up and ran out. I got upset and I wanted to convince myself that I didn't like her, so I blurted out "It's so obvious she has a crush on me, she's so weird I don't know why you hang out with her." I thought I could get over her, but I can't, I love her. I know it makes me look like really bad, being in love with another girl, but like I really really like Mj and I'm going to break up with Melany soon.

Chapter 4: The breakup

“Hey Mel,” I said. Tempted to rip the bandaid off, but she stopped me before I could finish my sentence. “Ok Cruz so I know I invited you to dinner with my family this weekend, but Seth invited his new girlfriend, Mj, to dinner and I don’t know if you want to go still or if it’ll be awkward for you,” “No, no, no that won’t be a problem for me the more the merrier,” I say which is kind of out of character for me, but it’s ok.

Then I was walking to class, and guess who the freak I saw, yep, I saw Seth and Mj walking down the hallway holding hands. Disgusting. Almost wanting to cry I ran to the restroom, it felt like I couldn’t breathe or see straight. I realized this is the signs of jealousy I hated, I rinsed my face and I heard someone walk in. I quickly went in the stall closest to me and I heard Seth’s voice he was talking about Mj. I pulled my phone out and started recording a video just barley peeking out the bottom of the stall. “Yeah I made the rumor and blamed it on Cruz, he had it coming though she’s had a crush on him this whole time but she never realized. So I wanted to make her realize that I’m perfect for her, so yeah all that was me right pretty genius,” he said smugly. I fell out the stall and he saw my phone recording though.

Right after that I ran out of there and he didn’t chase me or anything but I was scared he did, so I kinda sorta maybe ran out of the school, and all the way home. I got called to the office the next morning, it wasn’t about me running out of the school. No, it was about this whole situation. And here we are.

Student Name: Jenna Bartee
Grade: 9
School: Deer Park High School-N Campus
Title: Poisoned Harvest
Category: Poetry
Key: Silver Key
Educator: Ashley Davis

Tongue twister repetition tearing through my intestines

A knot ties in my chest

Swelling over my lungs,

Exploding through my sternum

Flowers grew in my heart.

And you aren't the first to try to

Rip out the roots.

Scar tissue isn't the only thing that grew,

A not-so old anger boils in my stomach

And it radiates into my skull,

Sinking talons into my frontal lobe.

An infection I just recovered from.

Next time I'll rip out your roots,

Instead of my hair.

Maybe you'll learn how it feels

To rot from the inside.

Student Name: jamani james
Grade: 8
School: Deepwater Junior High School
Title: Safe Places
Category: Personal Essay & Memoir
Key: Silver Key
Educator: Alyssa Hamaker

I am very thankful for my mom, I feel like no one gets me like my mom gets me although she's my mom. I can talk to my mom about anything that comes to mind rather it's a negative or positive thought and she'll try to answer even if she may not know how or what to say, my mom have been with me since day one and I feel like she's the only real person I have in my life, she's the parent who decided to stay even when times got hard even when she was feeling down and felt like she was losing herself and feeling like a bad parent she was still there even if she had to fake a smile for us and act happy like everything fine when it wasn't. Although sometimes she feels like she may be doing a bad job at parenting we're there to remind her she's doing a doing a good job, I feel like my mom is the most understanding person I really ever had in my life or try's to understand me in real situations or even just me being a girl type situation and she'll sit there and listen to everything I have to say rather it's me talking about or how my day has been or how I felt today or in the moment and although sometimes she says I talk her ears off everyday and always have something to say about anything but mostly what happened today or what I seen that shocked me or bothered me she'll listen to whatever I have to say. Sometimes I feel like me and my mom has a friend type of relationship so I feel like I can just open up to her about anything and she'll answer with a honest reaction or answer on how she thinks or feels and me and mom will sit there for hours and just joke around and even sometimes play fight with each other or even sometimes she'll randomly come in my room and mess with me by touching or I could be laying in the bed she'll walk pass my room and turn my light on and walk away or sometimes she'll come pull the cover off me and sometimes tickle me because in her word I'm a very playful and clumsy funny person and could be athletic if I want to depending on the sport, and will randomly lay in my room just to bother me with little things but will make me laugh.

I am glad I met my best friend evelyn, we met in the fourth grade but when we first met we didn't like each other for some reason but after talking and getting to know each other we got closer and closer through out the year but we didn't have any classes with either other but we always seem to see each other in the hallways and even lunch, we had a little friends group with girls named Brianna and mialove and we all got closer and till this day we still call on the phone but I'm glad I met her because when I'm with her I feel like I

can be myself and she won't judge me but we're both act a little when we're around each other, I love going over to her house and sleeping over even when sometimes we just lay in the bed on our phone and not talk for a while and just send instagram reels and tiktoks to each other even when we can just show each other, I don't know it's weird, we're really comfortable talking about anything rather it's us talking about our exs or boyfriends i guess you can say it's typical girl talk and I feel like I can really just open up to her and as best friends we follow girl code no matter how much we like someone example say if I like one of her exs I can't date him because that will be wrong and I will not be following girl code but I really love her and feel very comfortable then I should like I know it's weird but we've been going to the restroom together since elementary and not one of us just standing outside out the bathroom waiting for her to get out well be in the bathroom together and just talk it sounds weird but that's how comfortable we are and through out elementary we've stopped talking for dumb reasons but in the next class we'll talk it out and be friends again but I'm sure that happens in every elementary friendship.but now we kinda grew apart but we still check on another once a while or when we need someone to talk to.

Student Name: Sakora Anderson
Grade: 8
School: Fairmont Junior High School
Title: See you again
Category: Personal Essay & Memoir
Key: Silver Key
Educator: Lisa Diaz

I didn't know it then, but as I was standing in the hospital room with my dad and my grandpa, I was saying goodbye to my Memaw forever. The first time Memaw had gotten sick and gone to the hospital, the doctors sent her home with an oxygen tank and a home healthcare nurse. The second time she went into the hospital they kept her for observation, and the next day they said she could go

home because she was okay. I would come to realize later that it was a lie. She wasn't going to be okay.

My Memaw kept getting sick because of her smoking. She loved her cigarettes. One time she even asked my mom to walk to the store for some. Obviously, my mom said no because smoking is bad for you. We all told her to stop smoking, but she never listened.

That day before she passed away my dad, grandpa, and I went to see her in the hospital. My dad and I had gotten there before my grandpa, so my dad let me and her have some alone time. She and I talked about how school was going and how mom and dad were doing. After my grandpa arrived, we all talked to her and had fun. We played the board game, Sorry, and Memaw was laughing and making jokes like she always did. She really seemed like she was going to be okay. Eventually visiting hours

were over and I had to leave. I still remember standing in the doorway of her hospital room when I said goodbye. Saying goodbye to her was my most significant memory of that day. Her room was filled with the soft glow of cinnamon candles. As we were walking out of the hospital I remember it smelled like chlorine and French fries making me think of a water park. I looked up at my dad and asked him if she was going to be alright. He said that she was going home and everything would turn out okay.

I remember feeling like he lied to me when he said that, but as I got older I realized he was only trying to protect me and hope that it did not have to come to that point. I was little girl, and he couldn't bear to tell she might die overnight. The next morning my dad got the call saying she had passed away in the night. I remember him getting upset because someone had told him that one of the nurses had noticed her heart rate slowing down in the middle of the night, and did nothing about it. He always says

that there would have been enough time for them to help her if the nurse had done something. I think he just wanted someone to blame.

At her funeral, I wore a pink and white dress. I remember my dad crying a lot, and I understand why. No one wants to lose a parent. Being as young as I was I don't remember if I cried, but I'm sure I did. I loved her very much. Even though it was really sad, it was a very pretty service. As it was time to leave, I said goodbye to Memaw one last time.

As I climbed into the car I asked, "Daddy, she's never coming back is she?" My dad didn't really know what to tell me, but I'm sure it just made him more upset than he already was. As we were driving down the road my dad turned on the radio and See You Again by Charlie Puth came on the radio. Being as little as I was and too young to really understand what the singer was really saying, there was one phrase in particular that stuck with me. "It's been a long day without you my friend and I'll tell you all about it when I see you again, we've come a long way from where we began, oh I'll tell you all about it when I see you again. When I see you again."

Being older, I now realize what the lyrics of that song actually means. Every time I hear the words, I start crying. I was my Memaw's pride and joy. My mom tells me how proud she would be of me today. I really hope she watches over my every move. I love her so much and miss her every day. Unfortunately that's just how life goes. Yes, you have to move on, but you take them with you wherever you go. "I love you Memaw." "I love you too baby," I hear her whisper in my heart.

Student Name: Sydney Wilborn
Grade: 8
School: Deer Park Junior High School
Title: Summer
Category: Poetry
Key: Silver Key
Educator: Madeline Cornelius

I always think I love summer
Until it actually comes.
I find myself wasting the break away laying in bed,
Watching the sun sparkle through the ocean blue sky,
But it sparkles differently than it did last season.
And the season before that.
Even I've changed.
I'm not the same girl.
I'm now kissed by the sun,
But I still have the same pit in my stomach.
I wish I knew how to get rid of it.
If I did I would've done it many seasons ago.
I try to explain it to people but no one seems to feel the same.
I've forgotten what normal even is,
And maybe that's the exact problem.

Student Name: Leah Mesa
Grade: 8
School: Deer Park Junior High School
Title: Sun
Category: Poetry
Key: Silver Key
Educator: Madeline Cornelius

Too hot... Bright! Ah! My eyes!

That's what I hear everyday,

every week ,every month, every year. Nobody appreciates me I'm just an normal average glowing star.They only want me when they're cold and when they're not they've had enough.

They don't want me in the day but complain when I go away.

I try to warm them up but they always say " it's so hot today"

I really do try but they always complain, nothing is ever good for them. Oh I wish I was the moon for, I never hear anything bad about her.

Student Name: Lauren Hagan
Grade: 8
School: Deer Park Junior High School
Title: Swifts Influence
Category: Critical Essay
Key: Silver Key
Educator: Madeline Cornelius

"We are never, ever, ever, getting back together." I'm sure you've heard this song on the radio, or you're a fan. Well, did you know Taylor Swift won her 1st Album of the Year Grammy at only 20 years old? That makes her the youngest winner of that award. Plus, she holds the record for most Billboard Music Awards. In my opinion, Taylor Swift is amazing, but she has had her low times.

In 2009, at the MTV Video Music Awards, Kanye West snagged Taylor's award for best female video. He then stated, "Beyoncé's video was one of the best videos of all time." This was devastating for Taylor considering she was only 19 years old. Just a few days later, Kanye did apologize, but in 2016, this feud started back up. In Kanye's song, "Famous," he puts a line in there that Taylor did not agree with him saying about her. Taylor responds with, "There are going to be people along the way who will try to undercut your success, or take credit for your accomplishments...Don't let those people sidetrack you." Taylor rose above this situation, and this is why she is an inspiration to others.

That still wasn't the end to this feud. Kim Kardashian, West's wife, leaked a video recording between Swift and West. In the recording, Taylor agrees to be mentioned in the song "Famous," but that wasn't true. The recording was edited. Shortly after the leaked video, Swift's social media blew up with snake emojis. She became labeled a "snake" all over the internet, and #TaylorSwiftIsOverParty trended on Twitter. It almost looked like Taylor's career was over. She deleted all of her posts and changed her profiles on social media. She wasn't seen in public for a year. When she came back, she had rebranded herself as a snake. Her album, Reputation, revolved around the snake concept. Taylor came back stronger than ever before.

Just a year later, Swift took part in a publicized trial in 2017. Former radio host, David Mueller, sued Taylor for falsely accusing him of inappropriately touching her. Swift countersued stating he did assault her. "There were seven people who saw him do this, and we have a photo of it happening," she states. Mueller was found guilty, and Taylor pledged to donate "an unspecified amount" to organizations for helping sexual assault victims. Even though Taylor won the case, she's still a victim of sexual assault, and no one should have to go through this.

In 2019, Scooter Braun, a music manager, purchased the record label under which Taylor recorded her first six albums. Swift knew this was the worst-case scenario. Braun stripped Taylor of her music, and she was not able to buy it back. Later, she announces that she will be re-recording all her old music, so she can own the rights to it, "(Taylor's Version)." In present day, she has re-recorded her albums Fearless, Red, Speak Now, and 1989. Many managers do this behind their singers' back without them knowing. Luckily, Taylor caught on and will soon own the rights to all her music.

Taylor Swift has overcome her problems to be the best she can be. She is now on her world tour, "The Eras Tour," which has earned over 1 billion dollars in the US today. She is still announcing tour dates, and with the help of her supporters, she can accomplish anything. Taylor is an incredible human, and she is working hard to be her best self!

Student Name: Emilee Mendoza
Grade: 8
School: Fairmont Junior High School
Title: The Audition
Category: Personal Essay & Memoir
Key: Silver Key
Educator: Lisa Diaz

Hanging out in the theatre room after school waiting my turn to audition for the upcoming play *The Internet is Distracting – Oh Look! A Kitten*, I nervously scan my lines thinking to myself, “I really don’t think I can go through with this audition.” My fear is being in front of a crowd, any size crowd, even if it is family or friends. The only reason I decided to try out for a part in the first place was to face my fears and get out of my comfort zone; also, my friends bugged me a billion times to audition for a part. Finally, I was persuaded and caved.

I keep looking to see everyone’s face when they come out of the audition room, to see if they are nervous or excited. They all have different facial expressions; the ones that look scared, make me even more anxious than I already am awaiting my turn. I keep asking all my friends how intense the room made them, so I will know what to expect. They reply, “It isn’t that bad, but it is nerve racking.” Their responses do not help ease my fears. Others tell me as soon as you get on stage and start talking all the nerves will go away in an instant. Being my dramatic self, my hands are shaking like crazy, and I feel like I am going to throw up, but I manage to find myself standing on center stage.

I stop thinking about the process for just a second and then my worst nightmare is coming true. My name is called. I am next, and my heart drops into my stomach. Getting up from my seat, I nervously walk into the dark room. All I see is a stage with a spotlight and Mrs. Eli sitting on a couch writing notes. I creep onto the stage thinking “What am I doing up here?!” Bolting out of the room and running home was beginning to sound like a good idea, but I knew would regret it after all the work I put into getting ready for this audition. Mrs. Eli told me what to read and said, “Whenever you’re ready, you may begin.” As I position myself, I take a deep breath, and begin to read.

Wanting to get this audition over with, I read my lines super quick and quiet. I barely have time to take a breath. I don’t read with any emotion at all. Basically, I do the complete opposite of what is expected in an audition. I keep fidgeting with my id to calm my nerves down. My brain is pounding a hundred miles per hour thinking everything you could possibly imagine. I repeat to myself, “You’re doing good, you’re doing good.” After reading the last few words of the paragraph, I murmur, “Thank you.” Mrs. Eli gives me a couple of tips and notes. She says when I was reading, I was kind of quiet. Knowing she is

correct, and knowing she would say something about that, I laugh nervously. Sarcastically she chimes, "Emilee, I know you are not that quiet; don't be so nervous. Just be yourself." What she says is true. In her class, I'm crazy. A good drama student crazy. I'm loud and full of energy! Realizing she needs to keep things moving she compliments me, "You did good, Emilee. Tell the next person to come in, please?" I thank her and walk off the stage back into the classroom.

When I get back to the classroom side, I am so relieved. It wasn't as bad as I thought it was going to be. I didn't puke which is good because that would've been really embarrassing. Once I had gotten on the stage, the lights were so bright I couldn't really see anything in front of me. Which is kind of good because all I focused on was reading the script, and not on people watching me. After all this mess and craziness. I realize it is ok to be nervous. Just do not get into your head and let those thoughts stop you from trying new things and stepping out of your comfort zone. In the end, everything turned out perfectly; I got the part I really wanted.

Student Name: Reese Zepeda
Grade: 10
School: Deer Park High School-S Campus
Title: The Choice of Being Queer
Category: Personal Essay & Memoir
Key: Silver Key
Educator: Joshua Nebrida

Growing up, I always thought the thing that separated me from the other kids was my long brown hair in a crowd of blondes, or my deep olive skin skin, however the last thing little me could ever picture... was growing up, and being merely outcasted for who it is that I love.

Despite it all, being a Hispanic girl in a classroom full of white girls—it wasn't enough to make my peers inch away from me in a room or silently giggle at the audacity of my being queer.

I never thought it was that important; not enough for it to be this big, giant surprise to those around me.

I used to always question why if I liked boys—I wouldn't have to "come out," and why my own personal business had to become everyone else's... You know, the homophobes tend to complain a lot, saying that I am "shoving my lifestyle" in their faces, however they're the ones that like to pry in my own life. Whether it's the classic religious comments, attempting to turn me to Christ, or it's just random people who feel the need to make me feel less of a person.

I'll also never understand the questions about how I even realized I was queer when I was young, because it makes no sense. How are other girls allowed to realize at six that they want to be with their Prince Charming, but I can't realize that maybe I want my fairytale princess. I never necessarily realized. It was never this giant conclusion that I suddenly recognized, and that's the truth of it all.

It wasn't a choice I made one day because I had always been queer, it was just the matter of understanding labels and if I felt comfortable using them around people. That took a while, but once I did, it felt equivalent to having hundreds of gallons taken off my shoulders.

I will never forget the moment when I slowly uttered my sexuality to my mother after years of processing it and I instantly broke down once telling her. I was terrified of

rejection or disgust. Everything felt like it had changed once I said it—although nothing did. I was still the same kid I was before I let my parents know, only they knew a new, small piece of information about me. Despite always feeling out of place the first year of being openly queer to my family, I could never be more thankful for their support. My parents never necessarily cared about my being gay; “As long as you are kind, smart and not a pain in my ass, that doesn’t matter.” And it didn’t. They never loved me any less, which is more than I could have ever asked for.

I always tried to ignore little comments from sibling's or friends—that I was “faking” or doing it “as a trend” ... because if I could, I would be anything but a lesbian.

If it was a choice, I would be straight.

Because if it was truly a choice, little me would’ve chosen a long time ago to be straight so she didn’t have to worry about her parents not coming to her future wedding, or having random people scream into her ear about her “sins,” or having feel the fear of holding my future girlfriend’s hand in public.

If I had a choice, I would not be the outcast of my predominantly conservative city, nor would I choose to have slurs thrown at me in the lunchroom.

I am only fifteen.

I am only fifteen and I am carrying the burden of a mental lifetime because of who I am and the fact that in the year 2023, people still refuse to believe that love is all-embracing; love is without exception.

Love is queer.

Student Name: Madalyn Parker
Grade: 8
School: Deer Park Junior High School
Title: The Hotel Timer
Category: Flash Fiction
Key: Silver Key
Educator: Madeline Cornelius

The sharp creak of the floor boards echoed the room. A look to my left and a look to my right when only eight of us were on the couch. Where was the ninth one? The group huddled in a cluster while watching a scary movie when I noticed we were missing a piece. The eerie silence filled the room with horror. The dark shadows cast around the room with a singular dim light. Only I noticed Carly was missing. I was unsure if I should share, for I knew everyone was already scared.

I slowly got up to take a glance around the house, but I told the girls I went for more popcorn. I only lied to avoid several questions and stares. She's nowhere. Panic arises into my heart. What if? What if? What if? I let myself take deep breaths as I see the back door cracked open. My heart comes to a stop. Should I tell my friends or leave them in the darkness? I grab Hazel, my best friend, by the arm, whisper in her ear, and lead her towards the door. She, too, has the face of terror. The other girls knew nothing.

I took her by the arm and grabbed a flashlight while in fright. We crept out of the door to find a trail of what looked like blood. While following the blood path into the woods, a note stopped us right before entering the dark terror. At this point, we were close to 150 feet away from the house. Hazel read the note out loud. She read, "If you ever want to see your friend again, come to this location: 2891 Diver Road." We shrieked and ran back to the house following the fresh blood path. Our friends were standing at the door watching us run. They questioned us to spill the truth. After we told them, they gasped in shock.

The group made a plan to hunt down this kidnapper. One by one we walked out the house and into the car. The address led us to a spooky, abandoned hotel. A single note with more blood was left on the door. I read aloud, "Want to play a game? I hide and you seek. You have 10 minutes before the life of your friend runs cold. Timer starts now!" A big timer over the door started its count down. This was life or death. Darkness surrounded us while we only had 4 dim flashlights. The group split into pairs to look for this evil, wicked, and nasty kidnapper. Little did we know our batteries on the flashlights were low.

Hazel and I decided to look on the outside of the building. We hunted and hunted for this person but had no luck until we noticed a larger path of blood coming from the old wooden door of the hotel's side entrance. Was this a trick? Was this Carly, the missing

girl's, blood? Hazel opened the squeaky door to take a peak of the dark, spooky, haunted hotel. It wasn't all that great. What we could see in the stretch of the flashlight's light was an outdated office that looked like it had been abandoned since 1975. We slowly crept in with only 6 minutes on the clock.

There was a bunch of offices surrounding this larger office. After walking out of the huge office, we crept down the hallway, searching each and every cubicle and room. No sign of Carly anywhere. The blood had stopped at the threshold of the outside door. In the distance was a dim flicker. Was that her? We rushed down the long hallway only to find another pair's flashlight had gone out. We now are only down to 3 flashlights with 4 minutes on the clock.

The hotel was small with only 4 floors. With us now in the lobby, we searched top to bottom but still no sign of her. Hazel had a great idea to search the 4th floor since the other two pairs were on the 2nd and 3rd floor. The elevators looked like they quit working along time ago, so we took the stairs. Cob webs filled the entire staircase with little room to walk. Once we reached the fourth floor, there were about 25 rooms and only 3 minutes left.

We checked each and every room from top to bottom. There was 1 minute left. Near the stairway, we saw a flickering in the distance. Once again, we rushed down there to see who it was. Suddenly, another team's flashlight had gone out, so we were down to 2. We didn't see it before, but there was blood leading to a different staircase across the hall from the cob webbed staircase we took earlier. A sign hung on the door saying, "Roof Ahead, PLEASE STAY OFF!!" I was not going to listen to that sign, for my friend could be up there. Both teams rushed up the staircase with only 40 seconds left.

While both teams ran up the dark, abandoned staircase, we opened the door to see our friend tied up on the edge of the roof. We ran as fast as we could to grab her before she fell. A man appeared out of nowhere, and he was ready to push her off the roof onto a busted up concrete side walk. There was 10 seconds left. We got to Carly before the time was up, but something just made my blood boil. The man turned around where I could see his evil grin. I shoved him off that roof and into the concrete. The time was now up, and the clock let us know that by an ear-piercing squeal. His face was looking towards the moon while his body ran white. He was gone.

Student Name: Alainy Rodriguez
Grade: 8
School: J P Bonnette Jr High School
Title: The Station
Category: Flash Fiction
Key: Silver Key
Educator: Angela Nelson

All of us were standing at the station.

Everyone I knew. Waiting silently, occupied with our thoughts.

My thoughts were on the train. It was always the train.

Mother stood next to me, holding my cold hand in her palm.

"I'll have to go soon. You know that, right?" She warned.

The train arrived.

Her hand slipped out of mine.

She went onto the train.

I didn't understand why she didn't say goodbye. I felt sad. Now I felt colder.

I stayed put at the train station. I waited for what seemed like forever.

I'm not sure why I was waiting. I knew the next stop wouldn't be for me.

I knew mother wouldn't be returning, either.

Pa stood on my other side, telling me stories of his childhood. Stories of mother.

Stories before we were at the station.

The whistle blew from afar. It warned me the train was near.

Pa didn't say goodbye either. He went onto the train with Mother quickly.

I'm happy they're together, but now the station has become a little more bare.

I miss them. Yet, I don't know whether I want to board or not.

My dear friend, about my age, comes up front.

"Aren't you too young to go on the train alone?" I ask, assuming this is why she's come up front.

"Maybe I am. Yet, we all have to get on at some point. I simply must go earlier." She replies.

I wish she didn't have to depart so soon. The irritating whistle which grew closer hurt my ears.

"Why can't you stay?" I said over the sounds of chugging which slowly came to a stop.

"We all have to take the train sometime. My destination is just to be reached early." She explained.

"Don't think about the train too much. Look around instead, then accept it."

She departed, her thin blue cotton gown blowing along the cold wind before the doors shut.

The train left, leaving me behind with all kinds of emotion.

What if I don't want to leave? Why does the train come for everyone I love? Why does nobody say goodbye? Why must it all happen so quickly? I don't understand.

I am drowned in my thoughts.

I want to stop thinking of the train.

I need to stop thinking of the train.

Look around.

I turn my head left and right. Is there something more than this stop? Anything?

I don't want to stand here anymore.

Yet, here came a thought.

My stop isn't coming soon. Not right now.

I must stop thinking of the train.

I focus on the snow lying below me. The way the pure white flakes melt within a footstep.

I focus on the darkening sky. The moon and its craters surrounded by bright stars which are burning out.

I focus on the sounds of those laughing, chatting, playing. Those who are farther from the station. Nostalgia fills me from when I wasn't standing here.

For a brief moment, the train wasn't scary anymore.

For a brief moment, I could breathe.

Before I knew it, a whistle blew from afar.

It's not irritating. It's like music, like a bird singing one final melody.

I think I'm ready.

The train arrives.

The reflection of the glass has me see a woman with wrinkles and white hair. She's almost unfamiliar.

I place my worn out cane down, leaving a piece of me behind.

I board the train.

Student Name: Charlie Gaefcke
Grade: 9
School: Deer Park High School-N Campus
Title: There's No Book On Brothers
Category: Poetry
Key: Silver Key
Educator: Ashley Davis

There's No Book On Brothers

Jack

With the turn of the tide
He breathes a sigh, a salty breeze
Ignorant to the destruction left in his wake
A fluff a golden hair covering the milk chocolate of his eyes
His flashy grin to hide what won't impress
He races in his jersey, trying to obtain the unobtainable
Grasps for every passing trend, it's checkered banner just out of reach
Disagreements lead to heated arguments
Words in the form of knives leave those around him torn
Never on the same page, but bound together at the spine

Sam

A face of sunshine, beaming with eyes reflecting the sky.
Harsh words cloud his face and judgement,
Resulting in a downpour of emotion
Floppy blonde hair, swiped aggressively from his glasses

Freckles splashed across his porcelain skin
The perfect doll for dress up
From super hero to princess, he'll play the role with a shrug
A little oddity with dorky fixations
Playful punches as we jinx each other's sentences
Open pages, reflecting back at one another

Rhett

Flowers sprung into the world, adding colors I didn't know were missing
A smile full of life, and hugs full of warmth
His brain blooming with words I myself don't know
Mimicking my actions with childish giggles
My playlist on repeat throughout the house, in the voice of a kindergartener
His waves of copper brown thrown around with every dance
An abundance of joy, sometimes unwanted but always needed
Tiny hands to grasp onto your own, like a puzzle piece
Eyes intent with focus as he doodles creatures on every blank page
His life and color illustrate the black and white pages

Student Name: Ramsey Sanchez
Grade: 8
School: Deer Park Junior High School
Title: Why you? Why now?
Category: Personal Essay & Memoir
Key: Silver Key
Educator: Madeline Cornelius

January. January 20th, 2023. I get a message from my best friend. "Hey, do you know about my mom?" "No, I haven't heard anything. Is she ok?" I responded. "She's in the hospital." "Oh my goodness! I'm here if you need me..." That was the day that my worst fear actually happened. I've always been afraid of getting terrible news by text. Little did I know, it was only the beginning.

Fav Red and I have been best friends since I was 3. Her mom was my second mom, and anytime my mom wasn't around, she would always be there. There was never a dull moment when we were with them, which is why I was shocked when I heard this news. I checked up on Fav Red everyday from then on.

On January 27th, we found out that Beck was diagnosed with stage 4 cancer. When my family found out about her cancer, my household was an absolute disaster. My mom took it the hardest out of my family. That night my mom walked into my room and just laid with me. We both cried for at least an hour and a half. Hearing her tears made my heart shatter.

I turned to her and asked, "How is life gonna be without her?" She stared at me for a moment, just stared. She hugged me and didn't say a word. There we were just crying, comforting each other. She squeezed me tight while telling me the most gut-wrenching thing. "Rayne, I don't know if I can do this. How am I supposed to be strong for Fav Red and my own family if I can't stay strong for myself?!" "Mom you can do it. It'll just take time." Then she made me crumble, "Rayne, I can't do it. I can't wrap my head around the fact that I'm losing my best friend." "None of us can," I say. "My best friend is dying, and we all know it." She trembled as those words came out of her mouth.

We were all clinging to the fact that she was still alive... until January 28th. Only 8 days after, I got the scariest text of my life... "If you're up please get your mom or dad to call

us. Please, it's important." I didn't see the text until the next morning, but when I texted her, she never replied.

My nerves were skyrocketing... ring, ring, ring. The silence lingered in the air while we all stared at the phone. It was Jake, Fav Red's dad. "Hello?" "She's gone. She's really gone." He says with a lump in his throat. My mom dropped to the floor while still holding the phone. The sensation of hope disappeared in a blink of an eye. It was as if time had slowed down just to make the moment last a little longer. The call was over, but our thoughts weren't. No words, no tears, almost as if we were all expecting it. We were expecting it. We just couldn't admit it.

We drove to Fave Red's house just to make sure they were all okay. When we walked in the house, it looked like she just went to the store, which hurt a lot more than what you'd think it would. Seeing Fav Red felt like a bullet went through my heart. She was slouched, a cloud of sorrow over her, and she was nowhere near okay.

It was so hard to talk to her because I have no clue what it's like to lose your mom. The weirdest thing to me was that she was the only one out of her family not crying. Fav Red was the type of person who was there for everyone else but pushed her feelings away. She says she's ok, even though she knows you know other wise. She didn't want to look at herself in the mirror because she looked so much like her mom. She was surrounded by things that reminded her of her mom.

Slowly those feelings built up, and finally broke through. Sitting there listening to her cry, sniffle, and scream in pain was almost as if someone grabbed my heart and pulled it right out of my chest. When she was done, we were both in tears. We hugged each other until we both ended up falling asleep.

When we woke up, we went to her living room. Her family and my family go to sit down... no one sits in Beck's chair, not even the dogs. We all sighed in disbelief, knowing there would be so much behind this tragedy, but all we could ask was, "Why you? Why now?"

Student Name: Anisha Pokharel
Grade: 11
School: I H Kempner High School
Title: Chasing the Stars
Category: Personal Essay & Memoir
Key: Silver Key
Educator: Susan henson

When I was nine, my fifth-grade teacher placed a star sticker on my hand, calling me her superstar. I thought the sticker would fall off and get lost. But to my surprise, I was wrong. The star sticker stayed with me: it moved schools with me, changed teachers with me, and, most importantly, lived inside me.

Fragments of fifth-grade year collide with the present so that when doing homework, or taking a test, I feel tugged into a cassette tape, reeling back into the feelings of the past. Those feelings are a raging storm following the peaceful silence of the grey clouds.

2023: it was May 11, our World History AP exam. My nerve endings were about to burst as I walked into the gym, looking for my seat. I stared at the clock as the long hand ticked to 8:20, shaking my leg vigorously as the exam was distributed. My palms started to sweat, and I felt my insides turn each second like the red hand on the clock.

The proctor announced the test had begun. I looked down at my paper, which looked more like a mirror than an exam, staring right at me, showing every imperfection—both intellectual and physical. As the doubtful feelings plague me, I'm instantly reeled back into fifth grade.

2017: math has never been significantly hard, but it's my anxiety and self-doubt that chip away the little confidence I may have. I was the first to solve the problem on the board. But I was the last to answer the question. One day we were learning PEMDAS; it was the first topic I was confident about. I was solving the warmup problem with a breeze almost so that anxiety and self-doubt didn't have time to intrude my thoughts, questioning my ability. Strangely, after I finished, I sensed an eye on me.

Glancing over my shoulders, I saw Ms. Xydis watching me as I worked the problem on my paper. Quickly, I turned around, hoping she didn't catch me looking at her. But to my disappointment, she did. Soon after, she came up to me with a sweet smile. Eyeing between the board and me, she asked, "Anisha, why don't you lead us today?" I felt like begging, crying, and pleading with her to pick someone else. But my voice betrayed me. I could only nod yes as I stood up on my shaking legs.

As I made my way to the board, I felt all eyes glaring at me, stinging my back as if they were some bees sucking my blood. In that moment, I wished the walls could suck me in, consuming every part of me in the hopes of becoming invisible.

Once I made it to the board, I began solving the problem. However, self-doubt crawled right back in, growing bigger with each mark on the board. I took a step back to take a deep breath and calm my nerves. Once I stopped shaking a little, I began solving the problem again.

This time around, I kept turning back, looking at Ms. Xydis for her approval. I was seeking validation, making sure I was doing it correctly.

Validation: the curse of being hostage to others' perceptions and approval—the very feeling that consumed me my entire life.

The third time I turned around, I saw Ms. Xydis's mouth, "You're doing great!" But, instead of focusing on what she was saying, I was focused on her eyes. Her eyes held my gaze, speaking beyond the words she said. Her eyes looked proud, seeing me standing in front of the class, solving the problem despite my anxiety. At that moment, I knew she saw right through me. She saw me fighting against my own internal battles as I stood up there. The realization hit me like a tornado, so I turned back around and finished solving the problem.

At the end of the lecture, Ms. Xydis approached me, placed a star sticker on my hand, and said, "My superstar." Each letter s-u-p-e-r-s-t-a-r seeped inside me, ingraining the word as my inner voice. I stared down at my hand, seeing the star sticker tattoo itself on my skin as a constant remembrance of the one person—Ms. Xydis—who pushed me to do better, to be better, to be the superstar she saw.

Reality reeled me from fifth grade back into the gym. I looked down at the same place on my hand where Ms. Xydis once placed the star. And it's still there. Although it's not physically there, it's forever ingrained in me mentally and emotionally. Remembering her words, "My superstar," I looked at my exam; this time it looked like an actual test rather than a mirror. Using Ms. Xydis words as my inner voice and her star sticker as my guidance, I took my exam pushing aside doubt and fear. Ultimately, I ended up getting a four on the exam.

I still carry that star sticker with me as I did six years ago. Although I have not overcome my anxiety and self-doubt entirely, I continue to chase the stars to become the superstar Ms. Xydis believed me to be.

Student Name: Yunhan Sui

Grade: 11

School: Dulles High School

Title: Chinese Restaurants in Jackson Heights are Shutting Down; but it Brings Families New Hopes

Category: Journalism

Key: Silver Key

Educator:

For the past 12 years, Woks restaurant has been the essence for Chinese immigrants in Jackson Heights. Every day, from 11 AM to 10 PM, this noteworthy spot on 37th Avenue is filled with the aroma of Kung Pao Chicken, Peking Duck, and Stinky Tofu. Surrounded by this home-like ambiance, every afternoon, groups of friends and family sat along the sidewalks and enjoyed their cuisines under the sunlight. Amid the noisy street, they found peace in each other's companions and the familiar tastes.

The owner, however, never got to enjoy his food like his customers did. For over a decade, Wuchang Wang, the owner of Woks, worked seven days a week, 12 hours a day, and took off only two days a year on Thanksgiving and Christmas. The overwhelming workload not only left him with no personal time but also affected his health. Mr. Wang has been suffering from back pain and insomnia for over ten years. Now he is 65, and he has been considering retiring since May, 2023.

Mr. Wang is a typical example of the overworked, aging Chinese restaurant owners in Jackson Heights, a diverse neighborhood in Queens, New York with more than 70 nationalities and over 160 languages. Like Mr. Wang, Chinese immigrants from the nineties opened restaurants to keep in touch with their roots while looking for cultural companions. Although the food might not be perfectly authentic, the restaurants shelter the newcomers and offer them a sense of familiarity. The Chinese food industry flourished in NYC for about two decades. But when the owners from the era are ready to retire, no one can take over the job.

Since the repeal of the Chinese Exclusion Act in 1943, Chinese immigration to the United States has been rising. This trend drastically increased after 1990. Many moved with their family for new opportunities while others sought asylum, particularly after the Tiananmen Square incident. According to the Migration Policy Institute, today, approximately 5.4

million Chinese reside in the United States, while New York City has over half a million of the Chinese population.

The owners of these restaurants are reluctant to let their children take over the business. They didn't come to the United States to become chefs; this career path was merely a tool to earn a living. Second-generation Chinese immigrants mostly find middle-class careers in law, medicine, or computer science. According to Chinese Hospitality Alliance Tea Talk, before the start of COVID-19, the number of Chinese restaurants in New York City dropped by 16 percent from 2016 to 2019.

The owners, meanwhile, hold high expectations of their children. Research by Developmental Psychology suggests that second-generation Asian Americans find steady jobs to compensate for their parents' sacrifices. Faye Hu, who opened New Peking Kitchen six years ago, set a broad blueprint for her 14-year-old daughter. "I can work in a restaurant, but my daughter needs to do bigger things," said Ms. Hu, "We didn't come to America for her to be a waitress, she needs to join mainstream society."

Chinese restaurants also faced challenges from the COVID-19 pandemic. While the dining industry took a major hit in 2020, Chinese restaurants, specifically, suffered from preconceived biases as the coronavirus was first discovered in Wuhan, China. The maintenance costs were too high with months of little to no business. Shutting down the restaurants was the best way to avoid further losses. Based on statistics from Restaurants Hospitality, coronavirus caused 70% of sales drops in Chinese restaurants. By March 2020, 94% of the restaurants closed.

"We made it through, but it was tough until late last year," said Mr. Wang in Chinese. "We could barely pay for rent and support my daughter in college."

A lot of Chinese residents also felt that New York City was unsafe due to the rise in anti-Asian crimes as xenophobia peaked during COVID-19. Many friends of Mr. Wang fled the city or were hesitant to step out of their houses for days. As indicated by NBC News, crimes targeting Asian Americans rose by 361% after the pandemic outbreak, with New York being the most aggressive city.

New immigrants are also reluctant to work in Chinese restaurants. Chinese cuisine has higher material and labor costs, but the market prices are often low. Angela Juo, a

Chinese American who runs the Japanese-style restaurant Okawa, was able to profit from the business within one year of opening, but many Chinese restaurants don't have steady customer flows even after years of business. "Cutting fish slices and making Sushi is much easier," said Ms. Juo, sharing her typical workload, "You can sell the same materials with higher prices and less work."

Mr. Wang hasn't found a successor to Woks but plans to retire in a few months. His daughter graduated from New York University in the spring of 2023, which Mr. Wang is extremely proud of. He felt that he had completed his biggest task in America - supporting his daughter to live better than he did. In the future, he plans to relax and break free from being "a work machine" like he has been for the past twelve years.

"She is a real American now," said Mr. Wang, "And I need to live my life just like she will."

Student Name: Khushi Patel
Grade: 10
School: Clements High School
Title: confessions to a half-frozen heart
Category: Poetry
Key: Silver Key
Educator: Stephanie Yang

i lost my mind last night
it tumbled out my cranium and
into the crevices of your heart
and now i cant get it out
without getting my hands bloody

they say the love of a mother is the strongest
but they forget strength comes from pain
the type of pain that only comes with childbirth and a trampled heart
MOTHERHOOD girlhood
it's not so different is it (?)
we measure our progress in pain
blemishes of innocence linger on skin
until they become scars instead
we know only:
transient comfort
loud laconic love

love,
did you sit alone on hospital benches?
in a big foreign land with big foreign feelings

all alone

was it the new york snow storms that turned your heart cold?

you were soft once

i know because

i looked through worn photo albums

and childhood pictures of shy smiles

i know because

you pressed feathered kisses

between my eyes

and the world seemed so small then

then, now

your words are laced with anger,

your food laced with love

and i don't blame you because

i know

it was the medicine in your mouth that made your words come out bitter

i know

i will never be able to translate your sickness

it is so distinctly foreign

your cuts are generational

horrifically, painfully, and addictively sensational

it wasn't until i saw you mother your mother

that i remembered

you were once a daughter too

Student Name: Mady Li
Grade: 12
School: I H Kempner High School
Title: Consider the Giant Gray Human
Category: Journalism
Key: Silver Key
Educator: Susan henson

The bright beam of a yellow light floods throughout the NYT building, a building of prestigious and talented individuals, filling their cubicles at 7:00 A.M, sharp. Did I mention, we are all terrified of our boss? Don't worry, she won't be a stranger in this paper. Sorry Susan! I frantically rush into my cubicle, and catch myself staring blankly at my computer screen already darting my eyes at the clock. Tick, tick, tick.

Unfortunately, I am drowned in another paper by my very own boss, Susan Henson. She affirms that it will be a "fun" and "amusing" piece, yet I couldn't help but almost suffocate in my own set of tears. It's quite a chore being her top writer. Though, after being dramatic, I heard the term "animals" and immediately jerked up telling myself that maybe she'll say more interesting words. For once. With both of my ears giving her full attention, she states that I must write an argument regarding pain inflicted on the rhinoceros species. At this point, I knew this paper would take me ages.

I'm not one to be excited over horrendously long papers; however, this topic struck a jolt of passion in me. Literally. I fell off my rolling chair. But, by considering myself "one with the animals"; I believed that it would be simple for me to acquire a deeper understanding of the rhinoceros species. And not long after, I was on a mission to consider the rhinos.

My process started off this way: Google. And sure enough, thousands of rhinoceros images infiltrated my screen as my finger clicked "search." At first, a deep gasp left my mouth as I noticed how large this species was. If I could compare them to an object, it would be a school-bus implanted on the side of a road. But not only did their enormous bodies catch my attention, so did their horns. And I was appalled as I stumbled upon different angles of each of their horns – their species obtains two horns (a shorter and longer one). Scrolling further, I came across drawings of the species; however, they weren't like Pablo Picasso's pieces. These drawings resembled an elementary kid's art skills. The bright, messy and almost jovial-looking rhinoceros picture with little to no detail. It almost made me want to drop my entire paper and draw a rhino myself. However, I knew that I was in a time crunch and inevitably wanted to complete this paper with satisfaction.

To my unwillingness, I found images of rhinoceros horns on counter tables. Just horns. This led me to a raised eyebrow as confusion leaked all over my face. At this point, I was

at my desk table at 12 A.M, eyes almost closed shut, when a rhinoceros without its defense horns sawed off its head showed on my screen. An image of its scarlett-red blood dripping down from its face as it lay unconscious. Oh, the pain I felt for this animal as its own body part was gone, altering my emotions from amused by a drawing to shocked by an ultimate reality.

Unbelievably, more images of rhinoceros horns submerged on my screen like a flock of crows. This posed an interest in my understanding of the rhino due to the image's immorality that I witnessed. By doing more research, it occurred to me that the rhinoceros species' horns are significant to many. Images of poachers standing next to their kill, while violently gashing the rhinos' keratin filled horns ushered so many questions through my head.

Therefore, I could only come to one assumption: Behind the "protected" and "happy" images of the rhinoceros, there lies a darker side. A side of inevitable escape, capture, and slaughter. The gruesome hunt of a species for one thing: a horn that supposedly solves all problems.

For practical purposes, many know what a rhinoceros is. Per usual, though, there's a deeper conception to be researched and engaged in. After pondering on Google images, I decided to seek credible sources that would give me a better mastery of a rhinoceros' life. I found that the rhinoceros species also known as (family Rhinocerotidae) account for being giant herbivores that roam in packs of two or three. Furthermore, there are six subspecies of the rhino; however, five out of those six are involved with the longing horn that many people demand (Dinerstein). And there are various kinds inhabited in Africa, of which the relevant species of topic is the NWR, *Ceratotherium simum cottoni* (Dinerstein). The general name "rhino" comes from the Greek word for "horn," their main appeal ("Rhinoceros").

Moreover, this rhinoceros subspecies is considered in the same category as the Southern White Rhino (SWR). Both are white rhinos; however, some divide them into two subspecies (Dinerstein). Rhinos have strong senses that are similar to humans. Specifically, for white rhinos, their vocal communication is more developed than their cousins (other rhino subspecies). They utilize their calls of low growling and puffing to engage with their family members (Cinkova and Policht). However, the NWR obtains longer calls than the SWR (Cinkova and Policht). Reading this information sparked great empathy towards my understanding of this species. These animals are truly just like us – living creatures that inhabit emotions and communicate with their loved ones. Immediately, one thought rushed through my mind after researching their sense of call: I am learning about giant, gray humans.

But this thought is ironic in which they are themselves excluded from humans. Concerns among rhino conservationists regarding the NWR species derive from poaching and the international rhino trade (Chanyandura). Similarly, critics share their opinion on the topic

alongside their “justifiable” reasons. Nevertheless, both sides go head to head to beg the everlasting question: Should rhinoceros poaching be legalized in Africa?

As people may or may not know, a certain well-known researcher at the University of Tokyo, Hubert Cheung, affirms that NWR horns are utilized for traditional Chinese medicines (TCM) (Cheung). In fact, these horns are illegally and internationally traded through the black market to meet its increasing demand. Mainly, inhabitants in Vietnam and China ultimately believe that their horns can cure cancer and heart disease (Dunkowich). Additionally, it is proven that their horns are high in keratin, which is prized in East Asia (Chetni). An international ban on the rhino horn trade was enacted under the Convention on International Trade and Endangered Species of Wild Fauna and Flora (CITES) in 1977; however, illegal trade has continued on its path (Cheung). So, the discussion of legalizing the horn trade is said to be the best choice to some. This is true among Abigail Brown, researcher at the University of Queensland, who affirmed China’s 2018 announcement to relegalize the rhino horn trade (qtd. in Brown). By doing so, it is believed that the market chain can be reduced between suppliers and buyers, which will then reduce corruption (Eikelboom). However, legalizing the rhino horn trade will likely lead to an increase in demand, stripping the rhino species from the face of the Earth (Eikelboom). Therefore, I am brought to another researcher’s perspective on the imperative question. According to Jasper Eikelboom, from Wageningen University and Research, he claims that because the illegal or black market price for a rhino horn is approximately US \$30,000 and 65,000 per kilogram, there is an adequate amount of room for legal sales to benefit the NWR to capitulate considerable financial resources to safeguard their subspecies, making poaching less profitable (Eikelboom). However, it is brought to my attention that it is highly unlikely for most of the tax raised through NWR horn sales to be “reinvested in wild rhino conservation” due to housing and education being a political urgency in Africa (Eikelboom). Keep in mind, there are only two of its subspecies left in the world: Fatu and Nanjin (Callender).

Because of mass illegal trade operations hindering Asia's continent, many researchers and supporters believe that it is best to reverse the ban and legalize the trade. Sam Dunkovich, Young Voices Advocate and graduate of the University of Wisconsin Green Bay, claims that if horns were legalized, they would flood the market, bringing their value down, and therefore reducing incentives of rhino hunting (Dunkowich). Thus, once the ban is reversed, the dilemma revolving around rhinos and their morality will be solved. The morality of utilizing their horns at a restrictive level, while also protecting the other rhino subspecies from decreasing in numbers such as the NWR.

Although some East Asian countries justify their need for rhino horns toward medicine, other nations such as the U.S and Canada pose great health without the need of inflicting pain among rhinos. So, why is the demand still so high? What happens when all rhinos go extinct? These are the type of questions we need to be asking consumers of the trade.

So, will relegalizing the grade help conserve the rhinos or decrease their numbers further? No clue. But I do know one thing, their lives are just as important as ours.

The important point is that the animal-cruelty and unnecessary need of their horns are uncomfortable. It is, at any rate, unpleasant for me, and for anybody who expresses some sort of sympathy towards animals, let alone rhinos. And the critics of the NWR poachers have spoken. The legalization of poaching has shown more criticism from various non governmental organizations who deem this act as a reversal of all years in combating poaching (Chetni). Some researchers argue that legalizing the trade in rhino horns may not decrease poaching due to its price being inelastic (Chetni). Thus, it would push more poachers to kill for more money. Or what I call it, big bucks.

The issue of combating the rhino horn trade is all due to it being severely complex and somewhat "unknown." Therefore, if the trade is legalized, and the market is larger than expected, this would conclude for legalization to be one of the trickiest routes to commit to (qtd. in Chetni). Instead, some claim for the need of conservation efforts towards extinction rather than creating a larger problem within the black market. Though, this shouldn't even be a problem in the first place.

Specifically, critics regarding the NWR have longed for the conservation efforts of utilizing advanced technology such as cryopreservation to combat their extinction (Hildebrandt "The ART"). As mentioned before, there only remains two of the NWR in the world and they are both infertile, making it difficult for researchers to take more time on finding a feasible plan to save this subspecies from extinction (Gao).

Nevertheless, critics of rhino horn legalization have already mentioned the outrageous numbers of NWR that are left. I am one of the critics. From being a roaming animal of 61 as of 2009, their numbers have decreased to two (Hillman-Smith et al.). It is appalling to see such an animal be undermined and thought of as just human-benefit. I mean, where's the sense of morality? Where's the thought of that large and humanely-compassionate rhino one just killed, being the mother of a baby?

Ultimately, the morality of a rhinoceros is to be accounted for and it's shown from the remaining NWR in the world. The truth is: humans are the underlying issue. Yes, humans. The consumers at the top of the food chain. Instead of working together to combat the existing query of morality, people are selfish and desire to acquire wealth, whether it may be legally or illegally.

After considering the NWR, I am convinced that r keeping the trade illegal conveys a sense of morality in humanity. Although poachers illegally kill these innocent beings for their horn, legalizing the trade will inevitably make matters worse. Therefore, it's ultimately up to the consumer's behavior for change. The demand can be reduced, if not exterminated, by creating a united morality that is erroneous to purchase products with great detriment to this species. If government officials of Africa utilize media exposure and ask the global community to emphasize rhino poaching as immoral and inhumane, I

believe the trade can be shut down for good and these animals will get the justice they deserve.

Ultimately, the fate of the NWR species is at the brink of extinction and they need all the support they can get. We must fight for the giant gray human.

Student Name: Kathleen Yan
Grade: 10
School: Clements High School
Title: Criticism: A Double-Edged Sword
Category: Critical Essay
Key: Silver Key
Educator: Stephanie Yang

The famous Greek philosopher Aristotle once stated, "To avoid criticism, say nothing, do nothing, be nothing." This timeless quote beautifully captures the reality of facing criticism in life, which encourages individuals to pursue their goals despite its presence. While criticism often carries a negative connotation, it plays a role in personal growth and development. However, it is crucial to differentiate between constructive and destructive criticism in order to understand how we can grow. Destructive criticism, characterized by remarks, harmful feedback, and disrespectful comments undermines the essence of criticism and has serious consequences. The impact of criticism is far-reaching—it can negatively affect health, lead to instances of self-harm, and exacerbate the issue of cyberbullying in the digital era. On the other hand, constructive criticism empowers individuals by providing improvement while allowing room for growth. Finding the balance between these two forms of critique requires an empathetic and cognitive approach that fosters lifelong learning and personal development. In essence, this essay will explore the adverse effects of destructive criticism, and provide strategies that contribute positively to personal well-being and self-development.

With this understanding in mind, cyberbullying is anonymous and viral in nature. It has become widespread across the internet, introducing numerous discussions about its destructive impact. In today's digital age, where feedback is readily accessible, cyberbullying is on the rise. As individuals share their thoughts online, the embedded algorithms within apps attract engagement from various people, leading to both positive and negative feedback. Unfortunately, negative feedback often gives way to a vicious cycle of victimization that is built upon cyberbullying. Once people post derogatory comments or criticism, it influences others' judgments, who, in turn, perpetuate the negativity. This cycle of victimization takes a toll on the individual's mental health, causing significant distress.

Moreover, understanding the victimization cycle and the role cyberbullying plays in it is essential. According to the American Psychological Association, victimization involves singling someone out for cruel or unfair treatment, often through emotional or physical

abuse. There are two underlying components that contribute to cyberbullying's perpetuation in this cycle.

Firstly, the level of cognitive flexibility exhibited by the recipient is crucial. Cognitive flexibility is a type of brain function that enables individuals to display self-regulation and control. Recent research from Moreal and Calvete (2023) titled "Understanding the Perpetuation of Cyberbullying Victimization in Adolescents: The Role of Executive Functions," reveals variables closely associated with these brain functions, such as mindfulness and resilience, buffer the negative impact of cyberbullying victimization (3). In other words, cognitive flexibility allows individuals to view situations from different perspectives, enabling them to process information objectively and mitigate the effects of cyberbullying.

Secondly, one reason perpetrators engage in cyberbullying is their belief that they are rarely held accountable for their actions on the internet. A 2011 psychology study conducted by Zacchilli and Valerio, titled "The Knowledge and Prevalence of Cyberbullying in a College Sample" highlighted this perspective. In particular, one participant stated individuals resort to cyberbullying because they believe that they can "get away" with it, unlike traditional bullying that comes with instant repercussions (11). This lack of accountability makes cyberbullying more appealing to some, leading to its increased prevalence.

To combat the cruel victimization cycles spread by cyberbullying, efforts should focus on promoting higher levels of cognitive flexibility, holding perpetrators accountable for their actions, and raising awareness about the harmful consequences of cyberbullying. By fostering a culture of empathy, respect, and responsibility in the digital realm, we can begin to curb the destructive effects of cyberbullying and create a safer and more positive online environment for everyone.

As destructive criticism leads to cyberbullying, this harmful online behavior, in turn, gives rise to a myriad of psychological issues, particularly affecting mental health. The rapid globalization and increased internet connectivity have contributed to the escalation of cyberbullying incidents, which have resulted in a surge of symptoms related to depression, anxiety, low self-esteem, and overall psychological distress.

Consequently, destructive criticism not only leads to cyberbullying but also results in severe mental health problems. When individuals see negative comments, their brains

are the first to register the impact. It is important to acknowledge the brain's inherent negativity bias, which plays a critical role in how cyberbullying and destructive criticism affect individuals. At a biological level, exposure to negativity triggers heightened stress and blood pressure, leading to an increase in the stress hormone, cortisol, within the body. If it is not managed effectively, this distress can lead to delayed degenerative diseases like dementia.

A study conducted in 2020 by Dr. Natalie Marchant and her team at UCL Psychiatry discovered a link between focusing on negative criticism and cognitive and memory decline. Participants who focused on negative feedback showed higher levels of cognitive decline, indicating a significant impact on their mental health. Furthermore, the study examined symptoms of mental health complications such as depression and anxiety, revealing a close association between cognitive decline and the adverse effects caused by destructive criticism.

Conversely, constructive criticism proves highly effective and offers numerous benefits. Understanding its detailed aspects is crucial to achieving its potential. Constructive criticism provides recipients with specific, respectful, and actionable advice. The delivery of beneficial feedback relies on structured and mindful approaches, such as the PIP method—an acronym for "positive-improvement-positive." This simple template begins with an optimistic note, followed by improvement suggestions, and concludes with a friendly closing. Furthermore, it is essential to offer objective critiques that focus on the situation at hand rather than resorting to personal attacks. For instance, transforming vague feedback like "Your project is messy" into "Your project could benefit from breaking down complex sections into simpler components to enhance readability" allows for more constructive and observation-based suggestions. By utilizing these strategies, trust is fostered in relationships, and collaboration is enhanced. Summing up the essence of constructive criticism, it considers the recipients' emotions while effectively providing specific insights, contrasting with the inefficiency and rudeness of mere commentary.

To wrap it all up, as our reliance on the internet grows, especially among the younger generation, the prevalence of destructive criticism harming one's well-being also rises. We rely on the internet for work, networking, social interactions, and leisure activities, and given that almost all aspects of our lives are intertwined with the internet, which happens to be the primary place for destructive criticism, it is crucial that we take steps to reduce its detrimental impact and work towards putting an end to it. Looking back at Aristotle's timeless quote reminds individuals that facing criticism is an inevitable part of life. Criticism can be either harmful or helpful depending on which type. Destructive criticism, marked by harmful feedback, leads to serious consequences like mental health

issues and cyberbullying. Cyberbullying, a widespread concern in our digital era, perpetuates a cycle of victimization, affecting individuals negatively. To combat destructive criticism in cyberbullying, cognitive flexibility and accountability play key roles. Additionally, destructive criticism is linked to mental health problems, emphasizing the importance of promoting positive online interactions. On the other hand, constructive criticism empowers individuals by being specific and keeping an empathetic approach. Applying structured methods such as the PIP approach and prioritizing the circumstances instead of personal biases fosters trust and enhances cooperation with individuals. Overall, this essay has delved into the intricacies surrounding criticism, aiming to shed light on these aspects. By placing emphasis on these crucial aspects, the goal is not only personal growth but also to aid others in their journey toward improvement, preventing more individuals from experiencing the challenges that are now understood through scientific research.

Student Name: Kelly Zhou
Grade: 10
School: I H Kempner High School
Title: Dear Eleanor Letter: In America
Category: Personal Essay & Memoir
Key: Silver Key
Educator: Scheffie Lindquist

Dear Eleanor,

My father has been promoted to a new job in the States. Me and my family are currently staying with a family friend in Houston till we find our own place to call "home". Their house resides along a lake with crystal clear water, as the fountain splashes with the sunlight beaming across its surface. Every household has their individual property with wooden fences that withhold the stories of each family. Trees sway and dance in their thriving green colors like the enlightened, elderly ladies dancing on streets during early mornings back in our hometown. I stepped out of the car and onto the driveway for the first time in America as I heard the engines from roaring lawn mowers and the smell of fresh cut grass. Once we had all settled in, the adults started discussing restaurant arrangements for tonight.

My dear best friend, the States is not how I envisioned or have ever encountered. The people, the food, the greetings, and the care-free nature of Americans makes it too overwhelming to take in all at once. Did you know everyone orders their own plate of food and places it in front of themselves? Back at home, everyone orders dishes and places them in the middle to share. Even if it's just one serving of noodles for each person! We all get smaller bowls to taste and share amongst everyone at the table. And who would've thought everyone could drive themselves everywhere

without always being hesitant about traffic or where to park? We used to always take the bus, call a taxi, or walk because our city was always too crowded for everyone to own a car. On the night we went to dinner, we squeezed everyone into one car and headed to a restaurant about 15 minutes away in Town Square. Fun fact: cars could even turn right at a red light! Everyone in their cars minded their own business as they each hustled in their own worlds trying to get to their destination. You can do whatever you want without having to feel judged or watched, because everyone is so free and open-minded. At home, there was always someone observing and watching your every move. You must always be on your best behavior, or they will say you were raised with no manners. (We have both witnessed that in person).

Once we arrive at the restaurant, everyone orders for themselves, and the food is served on large

plates in front of them. There are no main course dishes placed in the center for everyone to share. In front of me was a large, heavy, white plate containing French fries with ketchup, and a tall burger with a stick through the center. My stomach started slithering with hunger. It felt pleasing to be able to own such

a large two-patty burger with a heaping load of fries. My mother and father found it particularly hard to accept, since they were so used to the cultural idea of sharing. But I, on the other hand, was delighted to keep everything to myself. I stared at my food with big eyes. I was so hungry I could devour my plate like a horse.

I like this lifestyle. I never had to overthink about if I'm getting too big of a serving from the shared dishes, if I'm being polite, or if I'm being encouraged to try a new dish I did not want. In America, it is simple: you are only responsible for what you ordered without additional pressure. Plus, there is no need to fight for the bill after each meal like we do back in China! In the States,

people can pay separately or together if they voluntarily wish to do so. In general, there are less complications and less stress when eating out with family or friends.

Everything is so easy-going here, even the school. I started public school here after 3 weeks of arriving

in America. All the teachers do their

part in teaching and it's our responsibility to study and perform well.

Teachers do not overload us with work unless it's necessary. There is free time to study extra and get ahead, but only a certain amount of work is mandatory. Compared to being back at home, schools here are much more relaxing. There is time to venture out and explore beyond the books that lie within our vision; in fact, there is finally a school-life balance. Before, we both used to meet up on weekends to try and cram projects and writing assignments, because every class got out of hand. I remember the "To-Do's List" progressively growing as each hour went on during the school day. Stress took over our existence and we slowly started to get blinded

by the world around us, since our minds have always been buried within our books and assignments.

There was no such thing as "living and appreciating the presence". After I started school here in America, I started to regain recognition of myself; there was finally time for myself and to do things I enjoyed.

Eleanor, the States makes me feel like a new person. I

know you would appreciate it as much as I do. People here live in their own world and within their own space. I can do what I desire without worrying about disrupting others or overthinking about myself meeting up to societal standards or labels. I enjoy seeing people do what they wish with freedom. Life is simple and straightforward in the U.S. This is a place for you to be when finding

yourself and working for yourself. There will always be opportunities lying within your reach. There will never be someone or something to stop you since everyone here is concentrated on their own lives. "You do you, and I do me." I finally gained insight into a bigger world after moving to this country. Perhaps, I should say I found myself again in a place that allows everyone to focus and work on themselves. People live in their own bubbles, and I think I am slowly starting to find mine. I know you will enjoy this place as much as I do. You should come and experience this side of the world with me.

Sincerely,

Your
best friend,

Kelly

P.S.

Say "hello" to our friends for me and ask how they are doing back at home. I will write to you more often and keep you updated. I hope you are doing well, and I hope to see you soon!

Student Name: Kenna Negassa
Grade: 11
School: I H Kempner High School
Title: Different Identity
Category: Personal Essay & Memoir
Key: Silver Key
Educator: Susan henson

When I was seven, I decided to grow my hair out as long as it could grow. My forehead, a part of me, was different from lots of my peers. Many of my peers had “four-heads” while I had a “five-head.” My head was a part of me that I couldn’t just simply change. My head was a part of me that would stay with me for my entire life. My head was what made me different from others, but I didn’t like being different at the time. Everyone took notice of this difference – my brother, my sister, my peers, even my cousin – and made me want to hide my features. Whether it be out in public, at school, or even at home, I felt out of place because of my head’s shape and size. I always tried putting on a hat or a beanie, sometimes jackets, just anything that would cover my head. Regardless of what I did, my head was always big and that would not change no matter what.

My childhood had many great memories that would fill me with joy for weeks. It had bad memories too that would kill all the fun I would experience. Regardless of these bad memories, none of them had a long-term effect on me, except one, rather many.

2014: I enter school, Rita Drabek Elementary, excited to go to class and see my friends again for another day of school. I’ve had a good day so far, woke up on time, ate a good breakfast, and got ready for school on time, fairly good for a third grader. I head to class with a smile on my face, happy to see what we will learn today and the activities we may do. The weather wasn’t looking good, with cloudy skies and moist air, so we were probably going to have recess inside, basically watch a movie inside. I see my friend and we nod our heads at one another while sitting down, no words. I don’t typically start the day talking with anyone, just get settled and wait for the teacher’s instructions before I let my energy out. My teacher, Mrs. Charanza, finished giving us instructions for a group assignment on gluing and cutting, simple. I head over to my friends hoping to become a group, but they already chose three people, the limit for one group.

“Sorry five-head, we already have three people,” said Marquez. I didn’t hear him and went to find another group, which I did luckily.

The people in my group were chill and we got straight to work and finished relatively fast. The class goes by and it's time for indoor recess, so excited. I regroup with my friends and start letting all my excitement out, talking and laughing like any other child. While I'm being a kid, they start acting like adults and tell me to shush, and then proceed to talk with one another. I just listen to their request out of respect and go quiet to watch the movie. Then we transitioned to lunch, now I can talk. I get in line for lunch and head back to my seat with my friends, when I hear someone say "five-head's coming, make space." I didn't know who said it and who exactly it was intended for, so I took a seat like normal. It wasn't until the end of lunch that I realized, I'm five-head. Then it hit me that I do have a big head, I mean it's self-evident.

I was a kid and thought this was just another joke for the day, I mean kids come up with names or jokes that last a day, just to make school fun. This name though repeated the next day, and the day after, then the next week, then month, even year. On top of all that, my cousin started calling me Megamind, which was a fictional character with a big head, haha, get it.

My cousin would enter our house, say hello to everyone then pick on me saying, "What's up Megamind! My favorite villain, what's your next evil plan in that big head of yours?" Get it, mega, big, yeah it was pretty funny for a while until it became repetitive. Best of all, to put the cherry on top, both my siblings, my sister and brother, started to high-five me on my head, a literal high five. I thought these names were a joke at first because I also had the physique of Megamind, big head and skinny

from the neck down.

I found it all funny until I started hiding my head, just naturally to avoid being called names, or getting hit in the head. I didn't realize how much it affected me until I started looking different from before. My hair, which was up in a mini-afro and my head showing, was now an afro pushed forward, covering part of my head. I even

avoided socializing for a while because I feared someone would bring it up again, that's when I knew I was insecure. It took me a while to realize that I let my insecurity control my behavior socially, emotionally, and part physically.

Being skinny didn't really affect me as much as the names and the high fiving. I could eat more, and work out more, but I can't just shrink the size of my head, I don't think

Megamind has the tool for that either. My response to these names and forms of bullying was what affected me the most of all. At the time, hiding my insecurities or being socially absent was not much of a big deal, but now as a high schooler and more involved son in the house, it plays a bigger factor. As more socializing occurs in the teen ages with lots of opportunities being given through the way you present yourself, being the insecure boy wasn't much of an option.

So, I changed. I matured emotionally and mentally and instantly never took such things personally, almost like a character shift. I realized being different made me a better person. It made me different from the crowd, the red card in the blue stack. This even helped me in embracing who I was and accepting myself for who I want to be, rather than what people expect, or want me to be like. While some may say this was bullying, it felt like a disciplinary act needed in order for me to grow.

I had become aware of the fact that I had a big head, and it took a while, but I eventually embraced it. Although I still have the same haircut that covers my head, I sometimes let loose and let my head pop out and get some fresh air. Being different in this way helped me not only grow but even experience bullying so that I could prevent it in a way. Now that I had felt the emotional damage, and physical in some way, I had some awareness of individuals who may be experiencing similar emotions as I did. With the help of my parents and other elderly relatives, I realized this small portion of bullying had become a minor trauma for me, but I couldn't let trauma control me. This trauma led me to think I needed to seek revenge or find a way to get them back. This was not the case, which wasn't who I was, and neither was Megamind.

This singular memory stuck with me since then and caused me to view myself in many ways. While it may cause flashbacks I prefer not to remember, it wasn't who I was. One part of me did not control the rest of me, one difference did not make me a different species. I was still human like everyone else, just different in a way.

Student Name: anh hoang
Grade: 10
School: I H Kempner High School
Title: Echoes of Regrets
Category: Personal Essay & Memoir
Key: Silver Key
Educator: Jamie Stevens

Echoes of Regrets

As my elementary school hallways began to reverberate, one particular voice stood out to me.

“Út oi, mẹ đây!” My dear youngest, mom's here!

Throughout my childhood, regret came into existence from my youthful ignorance regarding my mother’s limited English skills that contradicted my desires to fit in. The vivid flashbacks of me turning my head, ignoring my dear mother who just wanted to spend time with her youngest daughter at lunch, continue to pain me every time I see another immigrant mother with their English-speaking kid.

I’d always yearned for my immigrant mother to be like other moms, English-speaking. I would always wish she would just effortlessly blend in with other mothers, joining in on their conversation, going to parent-teacher meetings, and most importantly, speaking English to me in public. However, my wishes were overshadowed by the shame I felt because of my mom.

In my old elementary school, there was an organization for parents who struggled with English due to their ineptitude, where they would often meet for lessons. Without my knowledge, my mom decided to sign up for those lessons. It was around lunchtime when I saw a familiar figure smiling at me. It was my mother, coming out of the classroom with her notebook, glasses, and a packed lunch bag. This was what I dreamt of, but discomfort and embarrassment watered down my happiness instead. As she walked towards me, I sensed the condemning glares from my classmates. Though in reality, it was merely my imagination from the fear of their judgement. With every step she took, my mortification escalated. Why couldn’t she speak basic English? Questions filled my head about why she had to come to me when I was already trying my hardest to fit in. Why couldn’t she just learn the language in the comfort of the house? As these questions lingered, echoing in my head, I realized she was drawing nearer. This can’t happen. I can’t be seen with my mother whose main struggle was simply knowing English. The only solution my 9-year-old self could think of was to turn and walk in the opposite direction, ignoring her presence. I continued walking until I no longer heard her footsteps trailing behind.

Building up the courage, I turned around to her back facing me, and just like I did, she was walking in the opposite direction. I was too young to realize how my actions must have saddened her tremendously. Coming home that day, I saw the packed lunch bag on the kitchen counter that was packed with so much love that I refused to accept because of my need to conform.

In the following weeks, I persisted in ignoring my mom, wishing she'd realize I preferred her absence. My nescience concealed the fact that her English improved significantly. It was the day of the infamous mother-daughter dance. I hesitated to tell her about it, scared of being looked down upon by my classmates. However, she found out through her English class. Once again, I was faced by my mother's presence in the gym. Everyone else had a mother to pair with but me. I couldn't quite distinguish if I was pleased or embarrassed to see her. She approached me and we began dancing. With every dance move, the sense of humiliation faded away, replaced by a growing sense of joy.

"Út oi, I am so proud of you," my mom expressed.

Hearing those words coming from her mouth, I was taken aback. Although it was in broken English, it was her first English sentence spoken to me. Guilt showered me as I realized I'd fail to see the beauty in her learning journey. With tear-filled eyes, I hugged her, hoping she'd forgive me for my ignorance.

The humiliation and shame I felt for my mother withered away as she continued to excel in English. I came to understand that my judgement towards my own mother was useless as she isn't defined by her proficiency in English, but rather the depth of her love and determination. Regret was a heavy burden to carry, but it played a vital role for growth and understanding.

Student Name: Adamary Penalosa

Grade: 11

School: I H Kempner High School

Title: El Rayo de Fuerza

Category: Personal Essay & Memoir

Key: Silver Key

Educator: Scheffie Lindquist

I often hear that the United States has no official language, and while this may be true on record, it is also the cruelest joke to ever exist. Nobody in America is taken seriously unless they speak perfect or near-perfect English. For a first-generation Mexican American like myself, speaking perfect English is merely a distant dream. For as long as I can remember, I have been struggling to find a voice that lies somewhere between Spanish and English- one that allows me to express both my culture and my intelligence without being shut down by society- but it is simply impossible. This struggle has mostly shown up in school. In school, I am supposed to fulfill the expectation of exemplifying sunshine and greatness, but the societal labels that people have created for me based on my language and culture have changed who I am and somewhat hindered my ability to meet this expectation. While negative societal labels prevent me from becoming the bright, sunshine version of myself, they have also enabled me to follow a path toward greatness.

It is not easy to put on a brave face when people constantly label me as unintelligent and tear me down for how I speak. Up until the age of eleven, I was placed in ESL classes and spoke nothing but Spanish. Naturally, when I began to learn English, I struggled to form proper sentences, and my accent never failed to make an appearance. I never really became good at speaking English because my thoughts were always too many for what my brain could translate and my mouth could simultaneously say. To this day, I feel like I sound like I am using filler words to hide my stupidity anytime I open my mouth to say something in English, and I hate that about myself. The insecurity I feel when speaking English has not always existed in me, though. In elementary school, everyone in my classes spoke Spanish, so I never felt out of place for not knowing English as well as others. As the years went by, however, I became increasingly surrounded by people who were strangers to my language, and thus began my shame in being terrible at English. What scared me the most was that people would view me as "dumb" simply because I could not articulate myself very well in a language other than my own, and this fear was realized in high school. Even though my high school is known for its diversity, my classes rarely ever had more than a few Hispanic students in them. I already felt like an outlier in most of my classes, but group or partner assignments made my insecurities so much stronger. Most times, I ended up being the last resort for people to work with when their friends were not available; other times, people were forced to work with me

due to assignments by the teacher. Either way, I can always tell by the expression of my groupmates' faces or the way they look around to their friends to signal discomfort that they do not want to work with me, and that is fine. It obviously hurts me, but the larger problem is that whenever I make an attempt at participation, my input/ideas get disregarded because they are not deemed as good enough. I understand the information and feel confident in answering questions, but my ideas never seem to travel outside my mouth the way I want them to. I understand that people may be reluctant to work with me because I am not the best at expressing my ideas, but I just wish that people would know how smart I am in Spanish and that intelligence was accepted in a form other than perfect English. It is impossible to feel confident in my intellectual abilities when everyone else views them as non-existent. It is impossible to feel content when I feel like I am not smart enough. More than anything, it is impossible to be sunshine when I feel like the grayest, most insignificant and worthless version of myself, but it's fine. I can manage it.

Even though societal labels work against me, I am grateful for them because they have given me something to fight against and gifted me with resilience. My whole life has been centered round fighting off the stereotype that Hispanic people are less intelligent than other groups- the assumption that I am less intelligent than my peers. So much fighting has given me incredible strength, but I also owe that strength to my background. It is the same Hispanic background that I am callously shamed for that has built me up to be as strong as I am. I am the daughter of the two most loving immigrant parents who have worked endlessly to ensure that I have a good future; they shaped me into the determined girl that I am. I have been a witness to my dad arriving home from work with broken fingernails, cuts on his hands, and burns the size of apples all over his arms. I have also seen my mom's heavy eye bags and forced steps after a long day of looking after my sisters and me. Perhaps more frequently than any of this, I have had to hear my family in Mexico rave about how lucky we are to be living the American dream, but that is all it is- a dream. Still, I have witnessed far too many sacrifices and acts of resilience by my parents to throw that dream away, so thanks to my background, I am willing to work as hard as I need to in order to achieve my goals. I am incredibly proud of my culture, but I know that in America goals are only met through the English language; therefore, even though I am not the best at communicating in English, I am determined to fight against all adversity, prejudice, and labels that get in my way of meeting my goals. Despite how hard trying to find validation in an English-speaking society that tries to reduce me to an unintelligent Hispanic girl may be, I have always had my drive to be the best, most clever, version of myself, and I hope I never lose that. From the days when my little-self struggled to form sentences to now when I have to navigate through school within a society that unknowingly displays signs of Hispanophobia, I have been working to prove that I am more than just a dumb girl. I have worked not only to prove the "dumb girl" labels wrong, but also to prove to others and to myself that I am the complete opposite- that being Hispanic has only shaped me into the smartest version of myself. I admire my parents for their resilience, so I like to think that this combined with hard work is an

admirable quality, a perfect exhibit of greatness. I also like to think that I take after my parents in their hardworking nature, and that just maybe, I am half as great as they are. I believe the work I put in to overcome rude labels gives me the greatness people fail to see. I know it is.

Time and time again, I have fell victim to ignorant societal labels that underestimate my intelligence because of my imperfect English, but these labels have also underestimated the drive I have to defeat them. The labels that people have given me may argue that I am not intelligent enough to reach a high level of success, and they might not be something that I can ever rid myself of, but I have worked hard enough to know that I have done my part. While I may not always be a ray of sunshine, soy un rayo de fuerza, a ray of strength that strives for the ultimate goal: greatness. It is my resilience and determination that makes me great, and whether or not people decide to recognize that, es su decision.

Student Name: Jerett Lam
Grade: 10
School: I H Kempner High School
Title: Elegy of our Summer
Category: Personal Essay & Memoir
Key: Silver Key
Educator: Scheffie Lindquist

Though I can no longer speak with you, those blissful days we shared are forever ingrained within my mind like a garden of memories blooming with nostalgia and solace.

"See you tomorrow," you said to me with a firm and gentle smile.

Yet those words were as fleeting as your time in this world.

Under a boundless azure sky filled with tall and expansive clouds during June of my summer break leading to 6th grade, I embarked on a walk along a ditch lined by the fences of backyards. The sunlight shined down brightly, casting everything in a warm, golden hue. It was there that I met a teenage boy lying in the grass under a tree, "Morning," I waved to him as I passed by.

"Hey there," he said before pausing, "What are you doing out here?"

I stopped upon hearing the question and turned around,

“Just walking around, how about you?” My words came out a little strained, the sudden question caught me off guard. However, he shot me a bright smile following my answer and replied, “I’m relaxing, cause the weather feels great today!”

Honestly, I found the blistering heat to be barely tolerable for a person like me who was born and raised within the cold, winter season, but I repressed the urge to blurt my thoughts out. “Uhh, yeah,” I said, an awkward, frigid silence fell between us for a few seconds before he finally broke the ice.

“Not much of an extrovert, are you?” he sighed, his expression turned disappointed as he sat up.

An apology left my mouth almost involuntarily, “No, sorry,” I laughed, trying to downplay my embarrassment.

“I’m just messing with you,” he joked, flipping his smile back on. “I get it, some people are just like that.” Our eyes met, “How old are you if you don’t mind me asking?” Another sudden question, I contemplated whether I should’ve told him considering that he was a stranger, but I decided to roll with it because he didn’t seem threatening. “I’m eleven,” I answered,

“Woah...” his face turned surprised as mine

became puzzled. "You don't look or sound eleven at all."

I wasn't sure if I was to take that as an insult or compliment.

"How old are you?" I shot back,

"I'm seventeen." He said,

"Okay dude, you don't look seventeen just as much as I don't look eleven," I retorted, we both let out a small chuckle. Upon inspecting his face and stature, this supposed seventeen-year-old looked no taller than 5'4" and had a clear, bare face. The sun shined against his dirty blonde hair and reflected off his cobalt blue eyes. The only real indicator of age he had was a faint stubble of recently shaved hair around his mouth and his matured voice.

"What's your name little guy?" he asked, grinning.

"Jerett, and it looks like we're the same height, so don't try to call me little." I stated with as much conviction as I could muster.

He either ignored me, or didn't hear me,

"Well Jerett, nice to meet you, I'm Josh."

From that encounter onwards, Josh and I would meet at that same spot every day, sharing conversations, ideas, and experiences between each other. The flow of time became variable whenever we hung out, what

we thought was two hours would sometimes be six in reality. His outgoing and benign personality made him easy to approach; he was a bright and expressive individual, with optimism so contagious it could lift your mood instantly. That was the boy I knew.

Under

the setting sun on July 13th, with a sky that was turning a vibrant reddish orange. Our final conversation took place at the very spot we first met, “What are you gonna do after you graduate?”

I asked Josh.

“I’m planning on becoming a software engineer, you basically just program things for companies,” he sighed, “but the thought of all the classes I’m gonna have to take before and during college makes me unsure if I really want to do it.” Josh’s head tilted up at the clouds with a dejected look.

“I mean, are you enjoying the classes you’ve taken so far?” I tried to understand more before coming to a conclusive answer.

“They weren’t too bad last year, just a lot of tedious work, but I’ve been told it gets even harder after high school.”

“I think it sounds like you’re just lazy,” I said bluntly, “if you think about it, all you’re actually complaining about is the workload.”

Josh laughed a little and laid down, “You’ll feel the same way when you get there.”

“Sure I will,” I said sarcastically while

checking my phone. It was 7:14 PM.

"I gotta get back now," I

told Josh as I got up and started walking towards my house.

"Alright, see you

tomorrow!" he waved at me, wearing his usual, kind smile.

I waved back as he also started to get up,

"See you, Josh." I said, unaware that tomorrow would not arrive for him.

Josh was nowhere to be seen the next day, so

I went to his house and knocked on the door. A woman answered me with a despondent and exhausted look,

"Hi, I'm a friend of Josh, is he home right

now?" I said, she met my eyes before looking away and let out a shaky sigh.

"I'm sorry, but Josh got in a car accident last night and he's in the hospital right now."

I stood stunned as I racked my brain for the words to say in response to such an unbelievable statement.

"Do you know if he's okay?" I asked, trying to keep as much composure as possible.

"He's unresponsive, and we were told he probably won't make it." Her complexion started to break as she quickly wiped

her watery eyes between sniffles. "You should go home, but give me your phone number first so I can update you."

I did as she said, the air was heavy between us as we both tried to remain calm. Before I left the porch, I offered her a simple reassurance, "I'm sure he'll be okay." She nodded and replied, "I hope so," while stifling her tears.

The day came and went until I saw a notification from my phone.

"I have been informed that Josh has passed away."

"Thank you for being his friend." It read.

My chest contracted, my stomach twisted, my eyes stung. Tears started to flow as my face crumpled into a sob, the emotion rushed out as if a dam had collapsed within me. I set my phone down and wept as quietly as I could. How unfair, I thought.

Looking back now, I realize that death often comes for the best of us. Josh's passing was my first-time experiencing loss and I know it will certainly not be my last, and though our time was bittersweet, I will forever cherish the good memories we made in order for his life to not be overshadowed by his end.

Student Name: David Chen
Grade: 12
School: Clements High School
Title: Embracing Inconvenience
Category: Personal Essay & Memoir
Key: Silver Key
Educator:

Five years ago, my grandmother, Lao-Lao, woke up in the middle of night and complained that she had lost hearing in one of her ears. Subsequently, she developed a severe lisp and lost her capability for speech. All of this precipitated her cognitive decline and loss of motor coordination.

This condition forced Lao-Lao to have to write down her thoughts to communicate with me. Over time, she became as helpless as a toddler, and it was hard for me to accept that my Lao-Lao, who once possessed such vivacity and eloquence, was now reduced to a woman who vacillated between being mute and having random fits of anger. Sometimes, I secretly blamed her, like when we were late for church because she insisted on finding her iPad.

But then I thought about all the times that she had sacrificed her free time to teach me and care for me when I was younger. At two years old, she fed me, clothed me, and housed me while my parents were thousands of miles away pursuing their PhDs. During this time, Lao-Lao taught me how to sing Xiaopingguo ("Little Apple"), played Chinese Chess with me, and cooked me beef noodle soup. Lao-Lao stoked my imagination by telling me traditional Chinese stories filled with celestial dragons and immortal phoenixes, and taught me how to write Chinese characters stroke-by-stroke.

Now, our roles had reversed; Lao-Lao's condition meant that she needed a constant caretaker, and it was my turn to offer my assistance. As unnatural as it felt, I realized that I needed to set my impatience aside and try to understand Lao-Lao's wishes.

With this new mindset, slowly I began to adapt and understand Lao-Lao's needs. Since long car rides hurt her ears, I brought her earmuffs; and on sunny days, I brought Lao-Lao her favorite cotton hat decorated with daisies. When she applied for a medical insurance

card, I helped translate the necessary documents. Looking after her was challenging, but Lao-Lao's nod of acknowledgement and the small smile she gave me made it worth it.

Though I was becoming more comfortable with the added responsibilities, I still yearned to develop a way to communicate with her. Playing the piano became a hobby that helped Lao-Lao come out of isolation. At first, she started out with the etudes I had heard throughout my childhood, but then later switched to improvisation. Although Lao-Lao couldn't communicate verbally with me, the music she produced on the piano helped me understand her. I even learned to interpret her moods; loud clunky music meant she was irritated and needed a hug, while soft melodic tunes indicated that she was relaxed. While I was practicing cello, sometimes I heard a reply on Lao-Lao's keyboard, similar to the call-and-response rhythms I had played in orchestra class. Our playful and harmonious interactions brought us closer and provided me with a constant reminder that Lao-Lao's spirit transcended her physical decline.

My experience repaying my grandmother was the catalyst for serving my community. Seeing how much music helped Lao-Lao express herself when words evaded her, I organized performances for seniors at the local assisted living facility. After our concerts, some of the seniors would share their most cherished memories of their children's musical careers, making me immensely proud to have helped these seniors rekindle their joy through music.

My experience with Lao-Lao taught me that inconvenience shouldn't be avoided but embraced; after all, our relationship blossomed because of the sacrifices we made for each other. Above all, I learned what it means to feel supported and what it means to be a support system for another person. I'm looking forward to forming new relationships through the vibrant community I will meet in college, and being there for my roommates and classmates as we learn alongside each other.

Student Name: sophia quindara
Grade: 11
School: Ridge Point High School
Title: Eyes Closed
Category: Poetry
Key: Silver Key
Educator: Valerie Pauling

On June 24th, 2022, the Supreme Court made the decision to overturn Roe v. Wade, the landmark decision made in 1973 that protected the rights of women to an abortion.

Are they listening? Do they hear our cries?

Or do they just choose to not listen?

Have they adapted to the fighting, the screaming?

Has it become so constant, so continuous, they don't hear us at all?

Do they know that from the other side, it has only gotten louder?

That every shout unheard is prompt to shout more?

I wonder if they see. If they are even looking.

The day they officiated it. The day after.

The days before in their own premonitions.

Did they see us? If not now, then—did they see us?

I wonder if they foresaw the consequences, if the consequences were even considered.

Or maybe they didn't. Maybe they kept their heads down. Mouths shut. Eyes closed.

Oblivious. Oh, what I would give to be oblivious.

To not have the awareness of my God-given rights ripped from my hands.

To only feel the security, the assurance, of having what is deservedly mine.

The confidence, the certainty that I am safe. I am protected. My rights are protected.

What I would give to feel that way. For all women to feel that way.
To be able to breathe. I'm tired of holding my breath when men are around.
While men are silent and we are using what's left of us to scream, to yell,
While we suffocate, we beg for humanity.
I hope they can feel it. The weight. The pain. The remorse.

But it's too late for that now. It's too late to apologize. It's too late to recover.
We're too far gone, us as a whole, we can't go back.
What's done is done. The room for hope has diminished.
Because now that it's raining, it's pouring. It's their perfect storm.
Orchestrated, performed, steadily intensifying.
Ridding my rights, my freedoms, one by one, each a drop in the bucket.

Until I am empty. I am nothing. I am nothing but an empty object.
Because, what rights does an object have?
Other than to be used, to be exploited.
To be handled and disposed of.
I am not mine. I am theirs.
I just have to keep my head down. Mouth shut.
Eyes closed.

Student Name: Sophia Liu
Grade: 10
School: Clements High School
Title: Girls in Bloom
Category: Poetry
Key: Silver Key
Educator: Stephanie Yang

In a garden, I am watching the flowers
and you are watching me cry
I drip rose-red between my legs:
a lesson in preserving wilt through its birth

You drink nectar from eye sockets—
tell me my tears are sweet—
turn carnage biblical—

The proverbs:
*bruise chlorosis where lips meet skin
*unlearn the difference of their roots to yours
*rename pain as tenderness

sugared sap sliding down sore throats

I swallow;
because in a garden, you are strangling me with weeds.

—and the next day I am still dripping red
buried in soil, watering the flower beds

Student Name: Grace Cao
Grade: 8
School: Fort Settlement Middle School
Title: Glass Bottom Boat
Category: Personal Essay & Memoir
Key: Silver Key
Educator:

What was I doing here? Jagged rocks pierced my soles as I cautiously inched up the perilous path towards the shade that beckoned under an enormous oak tree below. Gravel flew up into the air as I trudged along the rough weatherworn path. Every step felt heavier than the last. The sun blazed brilliantly as I squatted to catch my ragged breath, sweat drenching my back causing my backpack to chafe my armpits. The sound of heavy footsteps filled the air, and my ears rang uncontrollably.

Looking ahead, bodies reeking of sweat were pressed together in clustered groups as students traveled together. I looked down with envy. Further below, boats skimmed placidly along the shimmering lake, campers snapped photos through boats' glass bottoms, capturing the mysterious sea life under the surface.

Before I came to this residential summer camp, I was excited at the prospect of solving fun problems. I expected to be in classrooms working on interesting intellectual problems, a situation I would be most comfortable with. Instead, I was startled to be confronted with a stark reality of physical exercise. This new discomfort came on top of my one uncontrollable terror: having to live with a stranger for two weeks for the first time on my own, with my parents three hours away. Before my arrival, I constantly worried about everything that could go wrong. My trepidation severely vexed me. What if my roommate does not get along with me or holds a grudge against me? What if I do something embarrassing like accidentally dropping my phone in the toilet? But worse, what if I do not make any friends, what if I am completely ignored?

Soon, I had my answers. My roommate, Amy, did not hate me, and was neither mean nor cynical, but she was not pleasant either. As soon as we were alone together, an uncomfortable silence filled the room. The air seemed frozen around us as I fought and searched for something smart to say.

"What school do you go to?" I asked, trying to sound as cheerful as I could.

"A private school you probably never heard of," she replied. She turned her back to me and busied herself by unpacking her belongings. "I'm going to call my mom. She's going back to Boston today." She picked up her phone and went into the closet to make her call.

I sighed inwardly, "Sure."

That had not been the beginning I had hoped for.

Now, my backpack grew increasingly heavy with every passing step. With no experience of hiking in the great outdoors and without a parent or friend to tell me what to pack, I had stuffed an absurd amount of unnecessary “necessities”: bug spray, sunscreen, sunglasses, first aid kit, bottled water and other things too dumb to mention. Nobody else seemed to bring a whole pack, except for bottled water, since they did not offer water and ice until after boat ride. All the counselors said that the distance from camp to the boats would be a “comfortable walking distance.” I am not quite sure I trust them anymore.

“Are we there yet?” I asked anxiously to one counselor, praying for a positive answer.

“It’s not far,” the counselor replied, laughing.

Maybe not far for him. He was least over six feet tall and looked like he could run marathons in his sleep. The betrayal was too much to bear.

I hurried towards the front of the crowd to catch up with Amy, who seemed to be enjoying the silence, busying herself searching for signs of wildlife around us. I made up my mind to break the ice between us.

“How are you enjoying the hike?”

“It’s okay.”

“Are you excited to go on a glass bottom boat?”

“I guess.”

And just as all hope seemed lost, a miracle crawled in our way.

“Amy, hey look! A turtle.”

On the side of the path, a turtle stood frozen in place, its head half curled into its shell, startled out of its mind at the enormous beings circling around it and snapping photos.

Amy gasped. “It’s so cute.”

“The great thing about turtles is that they build their own armor against outsiders but are actually delicate and sensitive.”

Amy looked up at me and searched my face, then said, “Exactly.”

To my surprise and excitement, she began animatedly talking about her pet turtle. As we shared our interests in turtle, the path in front of us vanished without a trace. The counselors began to lead us across an extended patch of grass. The patches of solitary grass crunched underneath my soles. We spotted some new wildlife: ant piles, some dangerously brimming with ants, and others abandoned. We needed to weave around them, especially the campers wearing sandals, who cursed under their breaths. The land around us turned swampy as we approached the boats.

From the shade of the vast oak, Amy and I scrutinized the boats floating lazily on the clear, pristine waters of a pathetic body of water, too small and shallow to be called a lake. They looked like ordinary tourist boats, but in their centers, between the two rows of seats, was a large pane of reinforced glass that offered a panoramic view of the sea floor. The counselors began separating us into groups as we lined up to wait for our turn. The marathon counselor directed Amy to a different boat, but to my surprise, Amy insisted upon staying with me.

After what seemed like a million eternities, it was time for us to board our boat, which rocked uncertainly as everyone else rushed impatiently onto the boat, like a pack of starving lions, gasping and pointing at the glass bottom, admiring the very peculiar scenery. After everyone's senses came back to them and the driver was certain that nothing bad would happen, he launched the boat. The boat sputtered at the speed of a lazy snail. Everyone began shouting boisterously at each other, commenting on almost everything worth mentioning: the crusty coral at the bottom of the lake, the unique design of the boat, and the occasional wimpy animal. Then we saw a school of fish all swimming together in lockstep, darting back and forth in unison at every slight change. In the beginning, one part of me kept on thinking that the glass was not there. But eventually, I overcame my fear and placed my phone onto the glass to record the scenery underneath the boat.

At that point, Amy exclaimed, "Hey, is that our turtle?"

"Where?" My excitement escalated too quickly, and I accidentally stood up, losing my balance and falling onto Amy, who was sitting next to me. Then I saw the turtle, swimming in the opposite direction from the school of fish. We both laughed at my clumsiness but marveled at the turtle. This moment was something Amy teased me about every day afterwards.

The ride ended too quickly. In the blink of an eye, I attached myself to Amy as the counselors prepared to head back to the dorms. The hike back must have been as hard and perilous as the trip going over there, but I do not recall that at all. Instead, all I remember is our laughing and talking all the way back home.

Student Name: Jiafeng Chen

Grade: 11

School: I H Kempner High School

Title: Goals Speech

Category: Dramatic Script

Key: Silver Key

Educator: Susan henson

Good afternoon, cougars! Staff, teachers, and especially parents of the Class of 2025, I wish you all a warm welcome to this wonderful evening at Kempner High School.

Well, guys, we have made it! We completed the first stage of our journey. I congratulate every one of you for the hard work, sweat, effort, and time you have put in the past four years. The class of 2025 is a special graduating class. We have faced the disruptive impact of COVID-19 on our path toward academic success. We thought it was a catastrophe, but it was really like a minor setback.

WE ARE HERE, WE ARE NOW ADULTS. To become a successful adult, you will need the following 3 tools. Instead of offering advice as in every normal commencement speech, I would like to provide you with valuable tools that play an essential role in the functioning of a machine. The machine is like your life, and these tools are pieces of advice that can fix and act as guidance for your pathway.

The first tool is dedication. By dedication, I mean not only investing your time and effort but also your heart and soul into the subject. When a person truly takes value in things that are held in high regard, that's when a student can see the positive outcome within their academic career. Like the famous light bulb inventor, Thomas Edison said, "I have not failed, I've just found 10,000 ways that won't work." This demonstrates the value and dedication Edison has in his research. Once coach spoke to the team about the power within a team that can truly invest their time into the field. That's just the simple equivalent term to make a unified football team. Since then, I have put all my effort into every rep of practice. Efforts can translate from field to classroom.

The second tool is time management. Many elite professionals in the higher class learn these crucial skills throughout their working experience. Believe it or not, as a high school student, you are currently in the process of perfecting these skills. While some students get distracted or procrastinate, you are on the right track to be better prepared. People who can focus and keep up with their tasks tend to score higher grades than those who procrastinate. Doing the bare minimum for each day is not enough to prepare yourself. Instead, you have wasted time and effort on a task that you could've scored higher on. Keeping your plan of time and tracking your progress can reduce procrastination.

Psychologists have discovered that techniques such as Pomodoro, Eisenhower Matrix, and Time Blocking method contribute to a student from becoming off task.

The third tool is networking. Graduating from high school means you are a step closer to the outside world. Leaving your comfort zone with friends in school is a process that many students go through. As an adult, networking is a skill that should be incorporated into your tool. Great networking rewards great opportunities, wealth, friendship, and lastly mental health in life. With this opportunity, you can seek career advancement through building relationships with people around you. In my own opinion, I think networking is the most important tool of the 3. It requires more social skills than any other tool. With great difficulties comes great rewards. There are many benefits to mastering these skills early. On the other hand, it will be detrimental for those who cannot master this trait.

As this commencement speech reaches its end, so does the first stage of our journey. The journey of being a Kempner cougar on a land full of sunshine and greatness. Looking through the past four years of being part of this facility full of supporting adults. I am going to miss every smile on my teachers' faces when they are proud of our class. I feel honored to be part of this huge community. Like what Dr. Jackson always says, "It's part of the cougar pride."

So, let's celebrate this momentous moment together, please rise, and let us applaud you for these unremarkable achievements. I would like to congratulate every one of y'all for making a tremendous effort. I am proud of every one of you all. Once again, I hope you can incorporate these tools to make you a better successful adult. I can't wait to see the incredible accomplishments that lie ahead of every one of you. Farewell, Class of 2025! Perchance.

Student Name: Aishwaryaa Udeshi

Grade: 12

School: Dulles High School

Title: Heartfelt Condolences

Category: Poetry

Key: Silver Key

Educator:

Heartfelt condolences won't bring back my dead daada*.

Heartfelt condolences won't bring back

planting tulsi and mint in the sweltering summer heat,

the sun beating down on our backs

yet we couldn't care less as we laughed the evening away about a Bollywood "picture."

Heartfelt condolences won't bring back

making rotis* together in the open-air kitchen — I'd tease him for his jagged edges.

Student Name: Aileen Nguyen
Grade: 11
School: I H Kempner High School
Title: Her Copper Stature
Category: Poetry
Key: Silver Key
Educator: Susan henson

Over the treacherous seas, a giant figure stands,
one that glistens under the sun, one with a torch in hand:
with a burning flame that represents the passions
of those before us, the ones who gave us their rations,
who said with rough and coarse hands, we can achieve
our wildest dreams, even if we are called naïve.
The land behind the figure seems flawless, yet
as we learn more, we must realize the expectations set.
A land built on those that were conquered, forcibly
taken for labor, and pushed to conformity
may not be the most ideal, but the figure still
watches over us, even when humanity goes downhill.

As the figure stands, she sees many anew
come through her golden gates, and as she
continues to stare across the vast sea of ships,
she sees that a young couple and newborn, a family of three
and she cannot imagine what pushed them, what hardships
they had to face in order for them to come here.
She admires their bravery to start a new life,
and kneels, saying, "Worry no longer, dear.

The time is right, and we commend you for your strife.

Let us welcome you with open arms,
and let us strive to keep you ambitious.”

The couple, succumbing to her charms,
knew it would be frivolous,
to back down on their dreams now.

The family felt a warm glow, as the torch in her hand
burned brighter than ever, as much as the copper material allowed.

Student Name: Nguyen Pham
Grade: 11
School: I H Kempner High School
Title: Her Words
Category: Personal Essay & Memoir
Key: Silver Key
Educator: Scheffie Lindquist

William Shakespeare. Charles Dickens. Walt Disney. Three of the many, who I believe, have crafted the greatest tales of our time. Their captivating characters,

their compelling narrative, their archetypes, style, rhetoric—shape the culture of our society, in one way or another.

But nothing will ever beat the storytelling of my mother, whose words have intertwined through the rivers and valleys of Biên Hòa; travelled the Atlantic to escape post-war Vietnam; sewed into the seeds of my youth, shaping my existence, as a whole.

She would tell a story no matter where she was—traditional Vietnamese proverbs and songs were her favorite, among stories of her childhood life as a farmer in Bien Hoa, experiences from her (short-lived) high school career, scandals and gossip from the aunties in the church choir, spiels to convince me that she was right when she argued with my dad the night prior. Maybe she never was, but I digress.

In the four hours of the day that I spent with her (she went to work at 9am and came home at 10pm), I was always hearing these stories in one way or another. And by always, I mean always.

“Bao ngày Mẹ ngóng...

Bao ngày Mẹ trông...

Bao ngày Mẹ mong con chào đời...”

I listened to the melodies of her songs as she washed the dishes, picking up some of the lyrics myself. The lyrics of ‘Nhat Ky Cua Me’ made no sense to me—I liked it because it sounded good.

“Trời đất ơi! Mà có biết mẹ bị đánh vì không rửa một tô bát không?

I listened to my mother’s very own personal anecdote, lecturing me about how her parents whipped her when she didn’t wash a singular dish. For context, I forgot to turn off the light in the restroom.

“Công cha như núi Thái Sơn, nghĩa mẹ như nước trong nguồn chảy ra.”

I listened to my mother's favorite proverb, rolling my eyes as I've heard the same one a million times. The literal meaning—that my dad was like the 'Thái Sơn' mountain and my mom was like a river—didn't matter too much to me.

As I got older and older, my attentiveness began to stray away from her narratives. I grew tired that she would pick apart my every move, following it with a whole life lesson that I never asked for; tired that she would always make me give feedback on her singing, nagging me until I told she sounded like she was on Paris by Night; tired that she never let me live in peace, in bliss, in silence. Sure, my mother was a great storyteller, but she told stories for on and on and on, and never knew

when to stop. I get it—I have to be taught this and that, but couldn't she just leave me alone?

As my unresponsiveness started to worsen, so did hers.

My mother used to retell tales of her childhood life on the farm in the seven minutes we had together, driving to school. But this time, I was met with what I yearned for:

Silence.

Like stripping an entire forest from its trees, the environment was bare; the birds could be heard chirping, as the wind whistled and whooshed. The uncanniest of it all, I forgot to close the restroom light—and no one yelled at me about anything.

Amid the silence, I recollected on my mother's stories:

"Bao ngày Mẹ ngóng...

Bao ngày Mẹ trông...

Bao ngày Mẹ mong con chào đời..."

—was a love song from a mother to her child, translating to 'many days I've been looking, many days I've been waiting, many days I've longed for your birth.' It was a message signifying her love, tracing her utmost veneration for me to moments even before my birth.

"Trời đất ơi! Mà có biết mẹ bị đánh vì không rửa một tô bát không?"

—was a personal anecdote from my mother to fix the mistakes that she, too, made as a child; except when she committed those mistakes, she never got second chances. It was a message signifying her care, teaching me to become a woman that not only she, but I, too, could be proud of.

"Công cha như núi Thái Sơn, nghĩa mẹ như nước trong nguồn chảy ra."

—was a traditional proverb that her parents taught her, metaphorically translating to 'a father's labor is like the mountain that lays the foundation for one's mother, whose love

streams like a river within.’ It was a message signifying her overflowing support, reminding me that she would never leave my side.

My mother’s voice, I realized, was a gift—she spoke to me because she loved me. Her stories allowed her true self to escape, unconfined by the strictness of her parents. Her stories embodied her childhood self, who was robbed from her schooling to work at a liquor store—when she wasn’t even legal—for her own survival. They were stories that spoke of dread, of struggle, of longing, and yet hope—hope that one day, she would be able to share her dreams with the ones who had the ability to reciprocate them—her children.

Even if she didn’t have the audiences that storytellers like William Shakespeare, Charles Dickens, or Walt Disney had, I was going to make sure that she would never be silenced again.

From then on, I vowed to myself that I would never—through every prose, through every verse, through every line—leave my mother’s stories unheard.

For the first time, in the last two minutes of the car ride towards school in my mother’s 2008 white Acura, I was the one who spoke first, singing the lyrics to ‘Nhat Ky Cua Me.’

My mother looked back at me:

Realizing that her words, intertwined through the rivers and valleys of Biên Hòa and traveled across the Atlantic to escape post-war Vietnam, have raised a child—a child that would carry on her legacy, doing all that she can to fulfill the dreams of her own.

Student Name: Sophia Liu
Grade: 10
School: Clements High School
Title: How to Plan a Funeral as a Child of the Seabed
Category: Poetry
Key: Silver Key
Educator: Stephanie Yang

Under six feet of Pacific, I kowtow thrice.
My parents' vertebrae are coral-tinged— annealing into sand, into glass.

We scraped phalanges till sea fire genesis. Chinese Dream is
enough parts water to drown in: dollars, smoldering
joss paper instead of yuan.

The oracle foretold spines splintered, lapped up by loss.
Vestiges softened into the Melting Urn. Pellucid spyglass birthed from rib.
So we lick our wounds and try to rebone the marrow.
So the aftertaste of mother tongue foams like saltwater.

Do the waves pull our bodies from shore,
or do we go looking for something to hold us?
Language is gutted the way a fish gasps for no air;
the way our fathers carved their necks
and thrashed gills into inheritance.

After this ceremony,
I won't know whether to lay their ashes
across the Yangtze or the Mississippi.
In those rivers: we learn not to drown
before we are taught how to swim.

—then I find the message left at sea.
The tide lulls, and shells clutch
against jagged rock. They whisper:
bury yourself far from the beach so
your children may kowtow thrice,
but need not under the weight of the Pacific.

Student Name: Valerie Huang
Grade: 11
School: Elkins High School
Title: How to Write the Next Best YA Dystopian Novel
Category: Humor
Key: Silver Key
Educator:

With the recent release of the new Hunger Games movie, it seems like everyone's itching for YA novels again. And of course you want to jump on the bandwagon and ride that sucker to stardom! I mean, doesn't everyone dream of being famous when they're young?

But since you never got braces, your teeth are still all kinds of crooked, and they'll never want you on the big screen! Luckily for you, writing, which you've always kind of liked, has got your back. There's just one problem—you don't know how to start your novel. I mean, you barely got through senior year creative writing when all you had to do was write a 500 word story, and boy did that second semester senioritis hit you hard.

But have no fear! With our tips, you too can fulfill your lifelong dreams of writing a YA dystopian novel so impactful it'll spawn a five part movie franchise (and fill your bank account with enough money to retire at 20)!

What are you waiting for? Let's get started!

1) Turn on those creative juices with your worldbuilding. Let's be honest--reading about a girl with two parents, a dog, and a house in the average suburban neighborhood? Yawn!!! If you wanted to write about something so boring you would have chosen realistic fiction.

But seriously, nobody who lives in a dystopian world has a normal family and a normal life, and readers know that. Instead, they're looking to immerse themselves in a world so messed up it'll make them grateful to live immersed in late stage capitalism. I mean, corporate greed's got nothing on a government that kills children every year for fun! Or a government that injects its citizens' food with sedatives to keep them complacent! Or a government that pairs people up based on their physical traits to create the perfect human (oh wait, that one's real)! Honestly, the list goes on. We recommend googling "most inhumane things that happened in history" for some inspiration.

Now that you have your Big Evil Government™, we recommend that you establish at least 4 different groups centered around 1 characteristic. Make sure to create a unique color scheme and symbol for each one--you'll be selling a lot of merch after your book is released, and you wouldn't want anyone to accuse you of being unoriginal. But I wouldn't stress too much about really fleshing out the details of each group. I mean, there's

nothing YA readers love more than assigning themselves a single label based on a singular characteristic. After your book has been published, it'll be a matter of days before BuzzFeed starts churning out those What Sector Do You Belong In? quizzes.

2) Make your main girl special. Remember when we told you to create different groups in society to split apart people based on one singular characteristic? Well, we're adding a little spice to that idea by creating a special group just for your main girl. I mean, what better way is there to show uniqueness than to literally put her in a one person sector?

But we've also got to make your main girl so special that for some reason, a sixteen-year-old is the only one capable of stopping the Big Evil Government™. Readers will pick holes through your worldbuilding if you make said Big Evil Government™ so weak all it takes to topple is a singular teenage girl, so we're suggesting a sneakier strategy that will have readers rooting for your main girl without questioning why! All you have to do is give your main girl some quirky skill like ax throwing, add some snarky one-liners to her dialogue, stuff in a tragic childhood, and boom! Now there's a reason for your main girl to be the symbol of the Revolution™ that overhauls an entire society's hierarchy and laws. All she has to do is sit back and look pretty while the grown ups do all the work.

3) Make your main girl plain but also beautiful. Let's be real--nobody wants to read about an ugly girl. Personality is NOT everything. But nobody wants to read about a stunningly gorgeous, ethereal, supernaturally irresistible girl either. You wouldn't want your readers getting so jealous they put down the book and sob into the mirror for hours about how awful they look in comparison.

So let's take the middle ground. You've got to describe your main girl's as horribly plain at the beginning of the book. Really emphasize this here by talking about her slushy gray eyes and limp brown hair and how utterly average she looks. But after that mid-book glow up? Bam! You've got yourself a supermodel. And guess what? You can still use the same descriptions that you did at the beginning of the book! Just plug that paragraph into a thesaurus and suddenly "stringy, greasy brown hair" becomes "glossy, silky locks of caramel." It's really that easy! Just like the glittering flecks of color in her eyes, you're golden, baby!

4) Kill off a loved one. Sometimes the plot gets a little stale. It's okay, we've all been there. But whether it's the inciting incident that gets your main girl involved in the Revolution™ or it's the straw that breaks the camel's back (we all love a deranged protagonist), killing someone meaningful off is always a great way to get readers' blood pumping again, especially if it's a character they've grown emotionally attached to.

So, who's it gonna be? The main girl's single mother, who's raised her and her sister for the past 16 years by cleaning the bathrooms of sleazy rich men? Have her die in a carbon monoxide incident while cleaning an abandoned part of the mansion for a measly bonus--utterly preventable, but then again the obscenely wealthy have never cared about the help.

Or for variety you could off a younger brother who was born frail, so your protagonist has had to do all the illegal hunting and trading and whatnot to keep her family afloat. He can die of some ghastly made up wasting disease that the protagonist ultimately discovers to be a genetically engineered virus spread by the government through the monthly food rations for population control (look, we're writers, not virologists). Our personal favorite is the mentor death. In that scene, make sure to vividly describe flashbacks of the mentor teaching the protagonist how to fight before cutting jarringly to a scene of the mentor choking out his last words as the protagonist sobs by his side, desperately pressing her hands over a gaping chest wound. Bonus points if the mentor calls the protagonist "kid" and compares her to his dead daughter. Ultimately, whoever you choose to kill off, make sure to really milk that scene--it'll translate great on screen. And whatever you do, don't kill off your main girl or her love interest(s). Fans may scream "plot armor," but they're not the ones who'd have to figure out how to write a sequel without any of the main characters.

5) Set up a love triangle. Speaking of love interests, is it really YA if there's no love triangle? Readers are HUNGRY for this drama. Your sixteen-year-old main girl may be the only one capable of stopping the Big Evil Government™, but she's still got some time to have a cute little teenage romance. Our favorite tropes to use are Boy Next Door™ and Enemies to Lovers™.

Boy Next Door™ is the first guy you introduce: he's super sweet and has grown up with the main girl. Maybe she has a little bit of a crush on him (and he definitely has a crush on her), but before she can do anything about it, she's whisked up into overthrowing the government shenanigans. But unluckily for Boy Next Door™, at the end of the book, your main girl's changed too much for them to be together. He ultimately goes to mope in some remote part of the country or whatever it is that rejected ex-crushes go.

Enemies to Lovers™ is the second guy you introduce and ultimately the one your main girl ends up with. After all, how else will you show character development if she doesn't end up with a different guy than the one she started with? He's cocky, devastatingly handsome, and rubs your main girl the wrong way when they first meet. They bicker for about half the book until they get locked into a closet together and are forced to share their darkest secrets, upon which your main girl realizes he's not so bad after all. Then while fighting the Big Evil Government™, they share a few kisses and realize that they're the missing half of each other's souls (or whatever cheesy description you want to use).

We love this strategy for two reasons. Firstly, think of all the fanfiction you'll inspire. Whoever you pair your main girl with, you can trust your readers to write fanfiction where she ends up with the other guy. There's always someone rooting for the underdog, and it's great free publicity. Second, when they make a movie adaptation of your book (and trust us, all those major studios will be lined up at your door with million-dollar contracts), they'll cast not one but TWO attractive hunks with enough combined screentime to make all the ladies in a 200 mile radius of theaters melt. Trust us, even those who haven't read the book are going to flock to the theaters just to drool over these GORGEOUS men (for this reason, we also recommend that you write in as many shirtless scenes as possible).

So how are you feeling? Excited? Nervous? Ready to win the Nobel Prize in Literature (we're just kidding, but definitely go check out our guide on that if you're interested)? Whatever the case, we hope these tips have helped jumpstart your journey to writing the next best YA dystopian novel. We expect to see your name in headlines soon!

Student Name: Geraldine Delgado
Grade: 11
School: I H Kempner High School
Title: I know what death feels like
Category: Personal Essay & Memoir
Key: Silver Key
Educator:

I might've not died physically, but in spirit. I've died and have been reborn more times than possible.

I remember the first time I died. I was locked in an antique, powder blue closet with gold finishes, although it was beautiful on the outside, inside, it was rotting and a pale beige color, I was all alone, awaiting someone, anyone, to come save me from this nightmare I called life. I was seven, and this is when and where my fear of the darkness began.

I've always been a target for bullies, if it wasn't for my looks, it was my teeth, name, age, and it wasn't just by anyone it began at the place meant to be the safest place, my home. I always heard people say they "couldn't wait to get to school" or "couldn't wait to get home," unfortunately, I didn't have the luxury of saying either, for both were a nightmare. I didn't have anyone to vent to nor any space to cry. I was raised by a father treating his daughter like a son, with no loving mother figure in sight. My feelings were ignored, so they continuously cast me aside, where I was told to be quiet and be grateful, the ghost child.

As I got older, I always wanted to be good enough, that was my ultimate dream...to be good enough... for my family to finally see me. That dream died at the age of four, when the molestation and rape began. I still remember it as if it happened yesterday, except it didn't just happen to me, it happened to the one I saw as a little sister. It started with us getting bribed with our favorite toys, then our favorite snacks, then money.

He introduced us to his "love," a physical feeling. At the age of ten and eleven, we realized what he had done, but I was too afraid to speak because he was family, but she was not. I begged her not to include me because of the fear of them not caring, but she told them everything and they believed her. Once again affirming this feeling of a ghost child, I found out they did care but not for me.

After that, I would rarely leave my room. I would only leave for school, and it was until late freshman year, when in an effort to awaken my true self, I learned to forgive, heal, and move on. That summer I found myself and my biggest passion, photography, capturing everything I found stunning, beautiful and surreal. Beauty, however, was subjective to what those around me told me, so every time I looked in the mirror, my

heart would break because I didn't consider myself beautiful. How could anyone who was bullied throughout their life ever be considered beautiful? I captured what I believed was beautiful, and for a year there was not one photo of myself.

My sophomore year, I reminded myself the reason I wanted to change for the better; to focus on nurturing the helpless little girl who would continuously cry in the corner and considered herself unworthy and not beautiful. This became my new dream. I joined clubs, talked to people, made friends, set up an early graduation plan for myself and even became a sports photographer for my school, which helped me gain confidence.

The ghost of the past was no longer a reflection. What I saw was a beautiful, courageous, determined young woman that could accomplish anything. I saw my true self. I no longer longed for the acceptance of my family. I longed for myself, my worth, my accomplishments, and how worthy of it I am. This was my new path, a path I chose for myself. I was still grateful, but their support didn't keep me going. Beauty was no longer subjective, I found beauty in everything, even in the darkest places.

My life may not have a beautiful start in the eyes of those around me, but to me it is the most beautiful story I've overcome. I'm grateful for every moment, but I'm most grateful for myself, for being able to carry myself in the worst of moments.

Student Name: Valerie Huang
Grade: 11
School: Elkins High School
Title: is this the american dream?
Category: Poetry
Key: Silver Key
Educator:

paradise,
is what they promised you
they said
as long as you worked hard
nose to the grindstone
you'd get what you wanted
after all, you have to make some sacrifices to get somewhere, don't you?
the american dream, they called it
just like cinderella!
if the carriage was still a pumpkin
and the gown was made of rags
and you, cinderella, were still curled up by that dying fire
warmed by the ashes of that once fiery passion
paradise?
with angels?
the only thing here with wings is you, icarus
sure hope you can swim

paradies,
living? if you call this life
half-life, decaying

until what?
they'll bleed you dry like this
look at you! not even halloween
and you look positively ghoulish
but such is life, you say
that death comes and life follows in a circular motion
is that why children grow up so quickly? to make up for those lost too early?
is that why children no longer have the right to be young?
oh, to be young and stupid
six and wild
eight and curious
twelve and enamored
sixteen and reckless
daddy's girl, mama's boy
daddy's suit, mama's pearls
poor children, growing up in such a world
look young! they told you
but think old! they scold

parodies,
half baked promises, hollow truths
it's just like you, fool that you are, to fall for their sweet words
just like cotton candy—so pretty,
so empty
honor, pride, courage, freedom
what they told you the nation was built on
your noble honor? when you lie, cheat, steal and still preach honesty

your bold pride? when your cheeks flush red hot with embarrassment every time
someone points out something that makes you other

your unwavering courage? when you run from everything that terrifies you, and cover
your eyes like a child playing hide and seek

your liberating freedom? when you lock yourself into your own cage and throw the key
away

i wonder how you can still so shamelessly sit upon that pedestaled throne and feign
godhood

as if your throne isn't made of air!

as if your divinity isn't a sham!

you court mockery like eighteen's puppy love

and still wonder why they call you a fool

parrotees,

the way that baby birds are fed

the regurgitated remains of their mothers' beliefs and insecurities

breaking the cycle?

don't lie; we see the puppeteer's shadow behind you

and how you grow limp when the curtains fall

being the bigger person?

the blades you cut people with look familiar; aren't they family heirlooms?

the very same that they used to hack away at you,

shape you,

fix you,

until you looked, and sounded, and acted, like their dreams come true

you, among those other cookie cutter children

tell me, what's the recipe for creating the perfect child?

a scoop of obedience + ten cups of accomplishments + a generous pinch of ambition

mix until homogeneous and rolled until flattened

bake until burnt by the heat of their questions

what do you want to do when you grow up?

where do you want to study?

(how will you accomplish something worth the ghost lives we left behind?)

(were you worth the price of our pain?)

poster child, wild child

from birth kept from running wild

born in the land of opportunity

and yet how ironic!

you'll never be free

(oh, but that's just the cost of living nowadays--haven't you heard of inflation?)

Student Name: Sara Khwaja
Grade: 10
School: Clements High School
Title: Itch
Category: Poetry
Key: Silver Key
Educator:

I'm anxious. There are a hundred and one assignments due at midnight.

An ever-persisting urge to scratch makes my fingers twitch.

One scab for each A+, is that enough?

The stippling of dark red scabs already litter my scalp like a plowed field.

Against my better judgment, I raise my hand to my scalp again,

Instinctive, uncontrollable.

Itch, bleed, repeat.

Itch.

For a moment, time is suspended in my little word.

The pinch of pain, stabbing into my skull like a red-hot pin pressed against my scalp.

A faint reminder at the back of my brain tells me not to do this again, but

A sick wave of satisfaction rolls over me like crashing tides against a rocky coastline.

My focus is drawn away from the nagging worries of the world and brought towards one point.

I'm begging myself to stop, and begging myself to keep going, all at once.

I wonder which one of these voices is me?

'A-pluses' turn to 'A's, and my self-resistance crumbles

Bleed.

A drop or two of blood drips onto my fingertips, collecting under my nails and staining my skin

My hand draws away sticky like my scalp

Marked red with the evidence of my compulsions and my lack of resistance.

The momentary reprieve withdraws itself completely, slipping through the cracks like water held in my fist, impossible to hold onto

Apparently, I can't hold onto my grades either, because 'A's, turn to 'A-minuses'

Repeat.

I look into the bathroom mirror and tell myself this was the last time

My voice filled with conviction but my eyes filled with knowing

The actions are inevitable and unescapable

Every itch digs me deeper into the hole, further reducing my chances of escape

I cover the exit with layers and layers and layers of blood.

Stained fingers on raw skin, pulling at scabs

Fresh blood dries on dried blood, and I'm aware of my inescapable fate

My mind is numb, resigned to the onslaught of damage.

'A-minuses' start becoming 'B-pluses'

Repeat.

It doesn't help anymore

I don't bother myself with contemplating an unconscious action.

I don't even notice when I do it.

In a haze, I pick up my hand and reach for my scalp again

Only when my fingers come back bloody do I return to consciousness.

Taking showers hurts, stinging in a hundred different spots as the water jets out against my raw, abused skin.

Combing my hair takes longer than normal

I have to be careful not to irritate each spot where the blood is straining against

a thin layer of scabbing eager to burst with the slightest touch,

calling out to me to put them out of their misery.

'B-pluses' turn to 'B's and I can't bring myself to care anymore

Repeat.

You reach out to caress my hair and I flinch.

Eyes widened in concern you turn to me

Is this not normal?

You convince me to cut my nails and I agree.

My scalp is still tender and burning.

I can't even begin to remember what I did before this.

You remind me, and the voice at the back of my head returns.

You plead with me to stop and it sounds like myself.

'B's turn to 'C's which turn to failing.

Itch,

bleed,

repeat,

begging myself to stop.

Crying out as if my feelings could control my actions.

What a foolish concept.

As if my body isn't already resigned to the inflictions of my mind.

Begging my fingers to stop in their tracks,

But my body has a mind of its own.

I'm yearning for a sense of normalcy again.

"How much longer will continue to I ignore this?" you ask.

I didn't think that I was ignoring.

Try as I might, I can't recall a time when it didn't hurt.

Begrudgingly, I let you apply ointment.

I have a hundred and one assignments due at midnight

One scab for each passing grade, is that enough?

Heal.

I notice right away when it stops hurting.

The first healed patch of skin is a dandelion in the concrete.

Like the crushing weight of a boulder is lifted up and off my chest.

The feeling is so enrapturing I'm lightheaded

I part my hair proudly down the middle when I go out, not a single drop of blood to hide.

I turn the shower up high and delight in the feeling of warm water rushing down my scalp.

'A's don't have to mean scabs anymore.

Itch, bleed, repeat, stop, heal.

Student Name: Katherine Truong
Grade: 11
School: I H Kempner High School
Title: Lady Liberty
Category: Poetry
Key: Silver Key
Educator: Susan henson

Plagued by the worries of the past,
drowning in the troubles of today,
all who arrive are greeted by the gracious woman at bay.
Just like the kindle warmth of winter's sun,
her torch remains ablaze with a luminous embrace.

The Mother of Exiles, her name echoes far and wide;
hand in hand, her presence like a guardian angel.
Ashore the coast of sunset walls,
"Bring to me your weary, your poor in plight" she calls.

With warm open arms and eyes seeping with a gentle fondness,
she welcomes them to a newfound place.
Those who have become lost within the map of their own homes,
those whose hearts have been fragmented and stolen of calmness,
the remaining bits and pieces lay scattered in a city not yet roamed.
They lie spread throughout the lands beyond Lady Liberty,
beyond the ports of two twin cities.

Adorned with her crown and flames of fiery,
the mighty woman stands not as a monarch

but as a creator of dreams.

She etches stories onto the pages within others' hearts,
crafting realms engulfed by love, opportunity, and infinite sparks of passion.

These glowing sparks, they dance in a beautiful ballad
while illuminating the night sky.

They twinkle all around the city, their placid
existence reaching far beyond the ocean's borders,
creating stars as alluring as the constellations
that all of mankind gazes up to;
the sparks unite everyone under one sky.

Student Name: Katherine Joseph
Grade: 11
School: I H Kempner High School
Title: Letter to my aunt
Category: Personal Essay & Memoir
Key: Silver Key
Educator: Scheffie Lindquist

Dear Tia Edith,

I have lived in America for my entire life and one thing I can't deny is that I do like living here; however, ever since I visited El Salvador, the place you've lived in all your life, I can't see why anyone would ever want to leave a place full of color, a place that instantly makes you feel at home. The country itself seems out of this world, the mountains surround you everywhere you turn and as you observe the horizon all you see is beautiful greenery with a colorful sky: clear baby blue lined with white fluffy clouds, or deep oranges, striking reds, and different shades of purple. The tree lines could go on for miles and the mountains roll over each other as if they were painted that way. The volcanoes that lie in the country offer a spectacular view of the entire city, the lights at night twinkle amid the fog from the height of the Chaparrastique volcano. The flowers are arrays of never-ending colors like mauve, cyan, and indigo and the cool, windy beaches offer clean water and beautiful sand. I know you want to move to America, but I think that in many aspects, El Salvador has us beat, bringing much to the table. The United States might have its own beauty, but not everywhere you look like El Salvador's does. The culture isn't like anything I have ever seen, every corner you turn you either run into a lady

making pupusas on the side of the street or the catchy music playing from at least one house on every block. In the U.S., most of our neighborhoods have less culture and music playing than one street in El Salvador does. The president has been making extensive improvements, making the country safer than it has been in years. Above all, most of our family lives in El Salvador.

The last time I visited, I was stunned by the beauty the country offered. Of course, I knew from pictures and stories my mother told me but seeing it in person was a surreal experience. The culture shock hit me the most. There was graffiti all over the walls on almost every street, like the art in downtown Houston; however, this art in El Salvador was purposeful, and you could tell the artists found joy and pride in their work. I was infatuated with everything I laid my eyes on. Looking around and getting to experience the endless, alluring view is a completely different feeling from seeing buildings and roads in the United States. On the sides of the roads, you can see vendors selling candies,

empiñadas (big circles of colorful thin sheets of flour stuck together with pineapple jam), sodas, and even coconut water. In the U.S., usually workers in grocery stores, waiters, or retail workers aren't as welcoming as the ones in El Salvador. When I visited, it took me so long to adjust to that and reciprocate because I don't experience that often going to Walmart or other places. Mannerisms are completely different in the U.S. and people could come across as rude. The people in El Salvador truly have a heart of gold.

I remember visiting the town center with you and my mom at night, you explained how one wrong turn could take you into a bad neighborhood – especially at night. Despite your warning, there wasn't a lot of worry in my mind because of all the improvements the president has been actively putting in since he got into office. The previous danger that posed a threat to many citizens for years was quickly diminished. It had gotten so safe that Miss Universe was in El Salvador this year. The unity of the country could be felt every time the candidate for El Salvador appeared on screen. I remember you calling my mother and you both sat on the phone the whole time the show was on, rooting for your country. Having something to be proud of such as Miss Universe feels rewarding and satisfying, almost like entering your favorite store after a long, hard week.

There is something bittersweet about leaving home at any age. You have been considering it for years, since I was a little girl. The United States does offer great opportunities and some people's lives do seem easier, but right now our country seems to be in a constant panic: inflation doesn't seem to be going anywhere, our people in politics are always scrambling to prove their points, and our own population is in constant battle between many different topics. TV shows and movies could make life in the United States appear as if it were straight out of a movie itself; even so, real life doesn't have the same magic those shows have. The perception that many people who don't live in the U.S. have about the country is skewed by social media, just like how here in the U.S. our perception of other countries is based on what we hear as well. Disappointment could come at any given time if you move here, which is one of my apprehensions about your living here. Moving to the United States seems like it's good, but you could be losing so much that you value in your life: your six dogs, your immediate family, and your own mother's home. My grandmother, your mom, is buried in El Salvador and my own mother, who regrets leaving her mom's grave, only gets to see her every few years when we visit. El Salvador is improving at a steady pace and not only that, but most of our entire family also lives there.

Here in the U.S., it could seem as if our side of the family, my mom's, has a ton of family living here, instead, it's quite the opposite. Our family is small over here, on the other hand, our family is everywhere in El Salvador. It's hard to visit family members when hours by plane separate you, even though you're living in the same country. My mom is even considering moving to El Salvador after her retirement in the years to come to be closer to you and the rest of our family. I think family is a big moving factor, but to come to a place where we are all so spread out is scary, especially when you would be a

newcomer. Considering all the factors that make El Salvador give off the impression that it is considerably better, I believe that you shouldn't move over here and uproot your entire life. In an ideal world, everything would be easier, but considering the differences, it's better to not leave something you've known for your whole life. I hope my letter rubs off well and shows you how the United States and El Salvador are poles apart from each other.

Sincerely,

Katherine

Student Name: Ashley Hatch

Grade: 12

School: I H Kempner High School

Title: Life Imitating Art: The Importance of African American Representation in Film

Category: Critical Essay

Key: Silver Key

Educator: Susan henson

Introduction

According to *Essence*, in the Academy Awards' (also known as "the Oscars") 95-year history, African Americans have only won 46 times (Sangweni). When calculated, that amounts to less than 1% of total Oscar winners in almost a century. This trend of underrepresentation is prominent across the United States film industry; according to Dr. Darnell Hunt, the Dean of the Division of Social Sciences at UCLA, only 9.5% of directors in Hollywood are black (Hunt and Ramon). The limited African American representation present in film throughout history has created an environment where stereotypes thrive. Additionally, these stereotypes have facilitated the generally negative perception of modern society towards African Americans, as film historian Paula Tosi claims that African Americans in stereotyped roles leads to increased negative judgment (Tosi). Her claim is supported by a study conducted at Princeton University. When asked to describe African Americans, the top adjectives used by participants were "lazy, ignorant, and dirty" (Keating). The offensive results of the study reflect the viewpoint of society as film continues to advance negative stereotypes of African Americans. Moreover, this depiction of black people in a negative light on-screen can also impact both their safety and well-being in real life. According to psychologist Thomas Ford, the limited portrayal of African Americans in film can directly influence the likelihood they will be targeted in society (qtd. in Jones). This is not a new trend in the U.S.; history has shown race as a dynamic process—from slavery, to emancipation, to the Jim Crow era, the Civil Rights Era, and so forth—where it must be considered in every situation (Smith). However, African Americans are resilient, and have made a community for themselves in America despite this. According to Nobel Peace Prize winner Nelson Mandela, in difficult situations times it's important to collaborate with others to strengthen the collective determination of a group (Mandela). The persistence of African Americans in both film and society is showcased in their limited successes despite the obstacles in front of them.

While representation in film has increased in recent years, it is still lower than the demographics of African Americans in the U.S despite demographic shifts. The noticeable absence of black people on-screen brings up the question: what are possible ways to increase African American representation in the U.S. film industry? Overall, an analysis through the economic, social, and cultural lens shows that increased representation

brings about many positive changes both on the big-screen and in society. The increased representation will aid in combating racism and stereotyping, while also paving the way for more racial diversity in media.

The Economics Behind Representation

African Americans absence on-screen is partly due to profit driven production studios and media ownership. Hollywood is dominated by six major production houses that hold the largest shares: the Walt Disney Company (38%), Warner Bros. (13.8%), Universal (13.4%), Sony (11.7%), Lionsgate (6.8%), and Paramount (5%), with the remaining studios dividing the remaining 11.2% (Malik et al). In large companies like these, profit is prioritized over racial representation considerations. Companies tend to invest in projects that have historically done well in theaters; however, by using this profit-driven logic they appeal solely to the white demographic majority in America, effectively assuming that racially diverse casts will not earn them as much profit (Keating; Malik et al). Therefore, films featuring black leads receive significantly less production money, impacting the quality of entertainment (Malik, et al). For instance, the 1978 film *The Wiz* featured the first all-black cast; however, its financial success was used to justify the diminishing interest in black people on screen. According to Professor Alfred Martin at Iowa University, box office outcomes of *The Wiz* were used to rationale disengagement in black Hollywood for decades after (Martin; Boyle). Moreover, it served as an example of the double standard present in Hollywood. Film critic Billy Rowe noted that *The Wiz* was forced to carry an enormous burden to revolutionize the film industry while also “holding the line” and not “shaking the system.” (qtd. in Martin). In addition, sociology professor Maryann Erigha builds on this by arguing that linking races to ideas about success or failure creates a racialized failure expectation for black talent in cultural marketplaces like the film industry (Erigha “Racial Valuation”). The double standard faced by the *Wiz* and other black entertainment, along with the limited funding by production studios, encourages a system that makes it extremely difficult for African Americans to succeed.

Underlying Racial Stereotyping in Film

From a sociological perspective, the film industry is a social institution that shapes important behaviors in life and also reflects society (Doane). Therefore, the lack of diversity present in Hollywood is an indicator of larger social concerns in society. According to Isabel Molina-Guzmán, the Associate Deam of Diversity at the University of Illinois, part of the reason Hollywood doesn’t reflect the demographic changes in society is due to explicit biases by those in control of production (Molina-Guzmán; King et al). The U.S. film industry continues to be dominated by white executives that have the power to shape public perception. These white executives continue to be at the top of Hollywood since its foundation is deeply rooted in white superiority, racism, prejudice, and

stereotypes (Chaney). Therefore, race representation often attempts to maintain the dominant order with whites at the top of the social hierarchy (Tosi).

The portrayal of African Americans in film ultimately comes down to what the white majority wants. Due to this, African Americans are frequently depicted with stereotypes to cater to viewers expectation of them (King et al). These on-screen stereotypes are difficult to debunk since they are systemic in nature. For instance, Disney's *The Princess and the Frog* (2009) was the first animation to feature a black woman as a lead. However, in the film the main character Tiana is depicted as the daughter of a maid who works as a poor waitress serving white people coffee and beignets. While the film does portray Tiana as strong and independent, it does this to make her the antidote to the "lazy Negro" stereotype (Barker). It's no coincidence Tiana is the only black Disney princess and just so happens to also be the only one who works for a living. Unlike her fellow princesses, her dreams of fame, success, and racial elevation are based not on princes or fairy godmothers but hard work and determination. The stereotypes Tiana faces in the film reflect the harsh reality for African Americans. The underlying stereotyping present in film production is difficult to combat with so little on-screen representation, and serves to reinforce the negative views of African Americans in society.

The Commercial Viability of Cinematic Blackness

To combat ideas of racialized failure, experts argue that the 2018 *Black Panther* superhero movie serves as a clear example of the success possible when equal opportunity is given to black productions. *Black Panther* has many first both culturally and economically; according to critical communications professor Shenid Bhayroo at Saint Joseph's University, the film is currently ranked first in revenues from a comic book adaptation and superhero films (Bhayroo). Global box offices sales passed \$1.4 billion in the four months in theaters, breaking earning records on 4 different continents (Bhayroo). Moreover, Disney Chief Executive Bob Iger attributed the 9% increase of Walt Disney's revenue to the box office success of *Black Panther* in early 2018 (qtd. in Bhayroo). With a production budget of around \$200 million, the film challenged long-held beliefs that racially diverse film wouldn't appeal to the American demographic and consequently not break even in profits.

Culturally, the film was groundbreaking since it was the first high-earning film with a majority black cast, the first Disney film with significant representation, and the biggest debut by an African American director (Bhayroo). This is reflected in the awards industry, as *Black Panther* is the most successful Marvel movie of all time, earning all 3 of Marvels Oscars: Best Production Design, Best Costume Design, and Best Original Score. As previously mentioned, since film is an institution, as you see more representation on screen there is a ripple effect on the other institutions in America. According to Lori Garwood, director of University of Arizona College of Social and Behavioral Sciences, as

representation increases and becomes more varied, other social institutions like government, school, etc. function similarly (Harwood). Furthermore, as opportunities increase for people to see Black stories on film, black people can then find a reflection of themselves and their communities on TV, dissimulating stereotypes of what black culture in American looks like.

Mirror Screen

Another way to increase representation is utilizing the idea of America as a mirror screen. In his 1915 book *The Art of the Moving Picture*, journalist Vachel Lindsay used the term “mirror screen” to describe film as an American institution that both expresses and forges the national identity (qtd. in Dargis and Scott). This understanding of cinema encourages a political analysis where the appearance of an idea in film increases the likelihood of it happening in real life. The idea of mirror screen and the resulting positive representation in film has been shown to have monumental consequences in American society. Researchers argue that the emergence of positive black imagery in film from the post-Civil Rights era of the 1960s helped pave the way for the election of former President Barack Obama, the first and only African American president in over 2 centuries (Dargis and Scott). According to African American film specialist Ryan Friedman, both James Earl Jones's portrayal as President Douglass Dilman in *The Man* (1972) and Morgan Freeman's character President Tom Beck in *Deep Impact* (1998) made President Obama's eventual election an instance of “life imitating art” (Friedman). By making American society more accepting to the idea of a black president, films featuring black presidents helped make Obama's candidacy and election possible. To increase African American representation, production studios can use the idea of mirror screen to create positive black imagery that can then be reflected in society.

Inclusion as a Business Imperative

The question of African American representation in the film industry comes down to the companies themselves that control the industry. Hollywood's cultural production today is still dominated by white males, while racial minorities stories get much less dissemination (Erigha “Race”). Erigha is supported by Molina-Guzmán, who argues that the media's tendency towards homogeneity is a direct result of implicit bias by the people in charge of production (Molina-Guzmán). Therefore, the largest way to facilitate lasting change in film is to integrate diversity as a business imperative. It is wishful thinking to try and solve racism; the smarter solution is to utilize both big business and the social capital of the film industry. Professor Maryann Erigha argues that a stake in the production of popular culture is an important way to influence societal culture (Erigha “Race”; Neff et al). This strategy is already being employed by the biggest names in the industry. For instance, The Walt Disney Company, which currently controls the largest

production share in Hollywood, has led an initiative called “Stories Matter” since 2019 to spark conversation about the context of their films (Keating). Along with this, they employ a group of experts to ensure any representation in their films is accurate (Keating). Since then, Disney has gone on to produce films such as *Mulan* (2020), *Soul*, *Luca*, and *Turning Red*, all of which feature racially diverse cast and storylines. Movies like these make younger viewers more accepting of racial stories and success since they are consistently seeing the same thing on screen. Putting representation as a business imperative should be made the standard throughout the production world because it can lead to greater audience reach and larger profits as seen in *Black Panther* (2018).

Limitations and Implications

Nevertheless, the main limitation to diversity as a business strategy is that it's up to the individual companies themselves to take the initiative. There are no laws for inclusion in the U.S., only discrimination. Companies must make the conscious decision to increase representation, regardless of if it means dismantling the current social hierarchy that keeps whites on top. However, since racially diverse films have been shown to be successful both socially and economically, more production studios will be inclined to make diversity a priority since it leads to profits.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the lack of African Americans in the U.S. film industry suggests many social issues. Production studios today use race to justify profit-driven logic, while the stereotypical portrayal of African Americans in film indicates a greater societal issue in society, not just on screen. Increasing African American representation is crucial to keep up with demographic changes in the U.S. and to challenge negative stereotypes faced by black people on and off screen. Stereotypes in film advance negative viewpoints of African Americans in society, impacting both their safety and well-being. By increasing their presence in film, social institutions across the country will change as well to imitate what is presented on screen. Overall, the film industry must put diversity as its main goal on screen to lead to a more inclusive and diversified society off screen.

Student Name: Angela Hoang
Grade: 11
School: I H Kempner High School
Title: Living Like a Moth
Category: Personal Essay & Memoir
Key: Silver Key
Educator: Susan henson

The moment I was born into an Asian immigrant family, my life cycle started. And like everyone else, we go from a spec of an embryo to a full-grown adult, eventually leading to the end of our life spans. But I would not compare my growth to that of a human; rather, I would compare my life cycle and growth to a moth.

As a moth grows, there is a stereotype that it will be ugly. It is already set in stone, and no one cares enough to disagree. But moths are closely related to butterflies. So why is a butterfly seen as pretty but a moth is not? Because of its physical appearance and global belief, even so, there is beauty in the ugly that people tend to ignore. The Milionia moth, for example, is beautiful and rich in color, and although it is a moth, it does not look like one. Just like a moth, growing up, I also had a stereotype placed on me: to be the “ching-chong” and the “model minority.”

When my parents first came to America, they only thought of it as “the land of the free and opportunity.” They did not view anyone as being the butterfly or the moth, but as being equal. Because isn’t that what we’re supposed to be? Equal? Little did they know, however, that they were already the moths in a nation full of butterflies. Only being a baby, I was not aware of the harsh treatment that my parents would receive just because they were “Asian.” They got ignored, looked down upon, pushed to the side, and neglected for not being the “model minority.” They were not rich, dressed in nice clothes, and they couldn’t even speak English!

In America, I thought that I would be treated equally. This was not the case. Everyone expected me to be this “born prodigy,” but they also discriminated against me for how I looked. For years, I also conformed to that belief, but recently I have been conflicted about who I am. As a moth grows, its beauty begins to shine, and as I grew, I let that “model minority” and being a “ching-chong” make me feel beautiful; I let it shape me into a better person; I did not let it define me. 2007: When a moth is first born, it is hard to differentiate its eggs from others. They all look identical until you look closely and see each detail that makes an insect’s egg identifiable. Moth eggs have a creamy color; butterfly eggs are either yellow or green; skipper eggs can be white or green. These details make each egg unique, but at the end of the day, they are still all the same, waiting to be hatched. Like an egg, when I was a fetus, I also had specific details that made me

unique from others. When taking ultrasounds, compared to other babies, I was smaller. We can see that each baby can be big or small, tall or short, and they each have our genetic codes. These things make us unique from each other. However, as we are just fetuses, we come to the consensus that there are no expectations for us.

July 2007: As the egg hatches, it then turns into a larva. As a larva, the moth is now different from other insects and can easily be distinguished. As a butterfly larva, it has countless different patterns and colors to choose from. It can be blue, green, orange, black, or brown. It can be stripped, splotched, gradient, dotted, spikey, or hairy. The moth larva, however, does not make it special; it only has a fixed creamy color.

This stage is where the stereotype first begins. Since a butterfly larva is already full of colors when compared to a moth larva, which one would people rather look at? The butterfly, of course! It is pleasing to the eye and doesn't look like a maggot! When the fetus is born, it is now a baby. Just like insects, they now have their individual qualities. One can have different eye colors, different skin colors, and different hair colors, but most importantly, one can be racially different. And what to keep in mind is that some races, like the butterfly, are seen to be "superior" to other races.

2017: I am no longer a larva but am growing into a cocoon. Although this might sound nice for a butterfly, being a moth, I dread it. It feels as though there is a basket on my back, and every day, 10-pound rocks are thrown at me. Some rocks consisted of the memories I cherished, while others consisted of stereotypes and conflicted feelings that were all trying to melt into one big rock. As they weighed me down, I realized how much I hated having labels put on top of my head.

As a sixth grader, I was getting ready for dismissal, standing near my classroom—one hallway consisted of six classrooms with no doors—and there was also another person waiting in front of me. I skimmed the hallway excitedly, waiting for the bell to ring at any second. Briefly making eye contact, he smirked, then exclaimed aloud, "Look at that ching-chong." The bell rang, and everyone started leaving, him included, while laughing to himself. I stood there, confused. Baffled? Perplexed? Angry? I was all the above; how dare he make an insult in the form of a joke, I thought. It made me feel even worse when not one person even batted an eye. I staggered to the bus with a million thoughts in my mind; they were running, sprinting, as if trying to finish the hardest marathon.

In that moment, I felt as though that very bus left me on purpose, and I had to walk a treacherous journey home. The next day, I had gym. During a game of relay, while everyone else was sitting in a line against the walls, the baton was passed to me, and I started sprinting. I felt free, and I had fun as I felt the air slapping my face and pushing my hair back. This isn't so bad, I thought. Once again, any joyous emotions I felt at that instance were interrupted by another tsunami. I heard someone shout in a whisper, "Hey, ching-chong! You suck!" What? There's no way he would openly just say that, right? I must be mishearing things.

Yet as I passed the baton, I looked over in his direction, and he was looking at me with that same smirk, as if he had just accomplished the greatest feat. Trash, every single one of them, I thought, although I never actually dared to say it aloud. At the end of gym class, we had to all line up to leave. I looked behind me, curious, and my eyes widened. Low and behold, it was him and his minions. My luck.

As the time was still early, we were all told to sit down. Not a moment later, I heard a roar behind me. Like the roar of a lion trying to intimidate his enemy. Crap, I'm scared. His friends started laughing, and I heard him whisper, "Watch this, guys." What? What do you mean, watch? Is he going to do something to me? I didn't feel anything, but I heard their cackling grow. As I stood up and started walking out, I looked down, a habit that had grown on me. As I looked down, white specks were falling. Snow? No...paper. He had put paper shavings on my head. From that day, through a ten-year-old mind, I realized something. No one cares if you're a moth.

From that day on, I hated being a moth and being Asian. I never brought my Vietnamese food for school lunch and questioned why I had to be Asian. I wondered if, if I were a butterfly, would I still be discriminated against for my looks?

Being a minority made me realize that just by looking different, you can get bullied for it

But even as I was discriminated against for being Asian, I was still expected to be the model minority for everyone else.

2023: As I entered my sophomore year of high school my parents began being harsher on me. They knew that they were the moths now, and moths had to work extra hard, especially when they came from nothing. I was forced to take extra classes and extracurriculars so I could be viewed as the "model minority." Even if I did not want to, I had to, because I thought, "If people hate me for how I look, I could at least show them what I'm capable of." Because if my parents always wanted me to have this mindset, I might as well express it. I began being harder on myself this year, sleeping less, studying more, and putting myself down if I did not get the grade I wanted. I joined clubs to make it seem as though I was involved. I started doing sports and helped at the church.

As I began to spread my wings to conform more to this stereotype, I started to feel less motivation, less meaning in what I was doing. It felt like there was a hole in my heart the more I tried to be something others wanted me to be. Couldn't I just be a moth? Why should I try to be something else?

Junior year came and I began to be more relaxed with myself. I might still be hard on myself, but I won't go the extra mile just to be the model minority everyone expects me to be. I started to talk to my parents, to try to make them understand my point of view that being perfect and trying to be someone I'm not isn't going to make me successful. If there is no motivation behind my actions, how will I grow? I want to do things my way,

being my own model. I don't want to be like every other Asian family where the kids' become doctors or lawyers.

As I began to realize my own identity, I began thinking about my race and ethnicity too. I wanted to make amends with it and restitch the torn pages of my life. For being different, I thought it was okay to pretend that I wasn't as Asian as I seemed to be. But now, realizing that my identity doesn't revolve around being perfect, I also know that being Asian or Vietnamese is okay. Even if people were to treat me differently for being the moth, I no longer care. Even if I were a moth, I still have my race and culture. I shouldn't strive to do things differently because I'm afraid of a little bullying.

Now as I break from this cocoon, I spread my wings not for stereotypes that were forcibly put on me, but for an identity of my choosing. Although being a moth comes with its hard moments where I despised myself for being one, I learned to express how I look through my own set of eyes where stereotypes don't define me.

Student Name: Sophia Liu
Grade: 10
School: Clements High School
Title: Mo Ri- (End)
Category: Poetry
Key: Silver Key
Educator: Stephanie Yang

It is the day before the end of the world
The final pivot of Earth's weary
sternum shudders until the star not in the night
sky drips down to its limbs

Somewhere in the countryside
When it melts open—
choose a ligament, a lymph vessel, take its whole
vena cava, even

A lady sits drinking tea
Its daughter is gifted laurel from its fingertips
Pressing a leaf to her lips,

Out the open window, mountains
are bathed in white
smiling into its sylvan embrace,
she thinks,

It is the apocalypse so it is beautiful
Bay trees are beautiful

as a parting gift

Yesterday, she drank tea,
looked out the open window,
and saw mountains bathed in white
But prior to her Mother's abscission,

The day before that too
and still after,
evergreens never lose their leaves

An amendment:

Perhaps,

It has always been beautiful

It has always been beautiful

Student Name: Mabel Huang
Grade: 12
School: I H Kempner High School
Title: Me and Mahjong
Category: Personal Essay & Memoir
Key: Silver Key
Educator: Haley Grimes

As I sit at the green square table, I am greeted by the familiar sounds of my mom's voice. "Pong!" she exclaims, as she confidently discards a tile into the center. The word echoes through the room, filling the air with anticipation. Moments later, another tile is played and my mom's voice rings out once again this time with a spirited "Chi!". These are common phrases declaring their victory, signaling the start of another exciting game of Mahjong.

In the course of my elementary school years, a familiar scene would unfold in the heart in the living room. It was a captivating sight to behold as my parents, accompanied by their closest companions, would gather around a Mahjong table. The room would be filled with laughter and merriment, as they indulged in their favorite pastime. As the game progressed, the air would be infused with the distinct aroma of Corona beer and the comforting warmth of freshly brewed herbal green tea. As a young child, I was always puzzled by the intricate workings of the game. Its complexity evaded my understanding, leaving me in a state of perpetual confusion. However, I couldn't resist the urge to spectate as the players shuffled the tiles around.

When Covid-19 made its presence known, I had more free time so I decided to learn how to play, mastering its complex details, and understanding its fundamental principles. Although it took me a while to process the basics of the game I was able to get a grasp of the concept. After a long day of practicing, I felt confident in my abilities. So, I decided to challenge my mother to a friendly wager. The stakes were simple: whoever lost would be exempt from doing the dishes for the night. I sat down and started arranging the set of tiles from color to color and pattern to pattern. Then, it was my turn. I grabbed a tile and considered what to throw out. I discarded the tile that indicated "thirty thousand". Such an instant move made me lose the game. I was devastated.

My mother's voice shared in my head as she provided her wisdom, "Any tiles can serve as a value, carefully discard what you don't need." As I thought about the advice given, its deeper meaning eluded me. Nevertheless, my attention was drawn to the minute errors that occurred within the span of a single round of the game. Those small mistakes led to my downfall of the round. My mom was able to point out my weaknesses and flaws in the

way I played. I learned as you sit down to play a game of Mahjong, your characters come to life before your eyes.

Over the course of several years, Chinese Mahjong has constructed itself into the fabric of my life, leaving an indelible mark on my journey. This ancient game, with its intricate rules and captivating tiles, has become a solid companion, guiding me towards personal growth and development.

A single tile can alter everything that is in hand. Realizing Mahjong taught me many things and built a character for me as a person. Curiosity and dedication came in handy and assembled an identity.

Student Name: Preston Trinh
Grade: 11
School: I H Kempner High School
Title: My Musical Journey
Category: Personal Essay & Memoir
Key: Silver Key
Educator: Susan henson

Pull the bow against the metal string, vibrate your finger on the fingerboard, and play with passion.

I had just played my favorite piece "The Swan" by Camille Saint-Saens. This specific piece tells a story of life through notes of pure contentment. The average person would not understand the meaning, but musicians would; they view it as a way of expressing their feelings without actual words or talking. I practiced every day since I got this piece; I wanted to sound more than just great. I wanted to make the excruciating five years of my life practicing pay off. In a way, I developed a sense of passion throughout the five years of playing. I viewed the cello as a way of expressing myself in ways words could not. I never knew how a piece of wood and metal constructed together could be my hobby, a leisure activity, or even a recreational activity.

The cello is an orchestral instrument created in the sixteenth century. Many normal people cannot tell the difference between a cello and a bass or a viola and a violin. These instruments, when played together, create magical music. The immersive sound of music can move many people's emotions. But from afar, many just see a piece of wood called a bass or a cello; a hunk of junk that appears meaningless to most. But under all the gloss and wood the cello has allowed me to grow as a human and as a Kempner cougar. An instrument has allowed me to understand the true meanings of sacrifice, happiness, and greatness. Who would know how much impact an inanimate object could have on my life?

2018: The first time I ever picked up a cello. I found myself with an instrument in a room with other sixth graders who were in the same situation as me; they didn't know what to do with this instrument. I eventually learned how to play the cello quickly and swiftly. I started to envision a reality where I would be the best cello player, or maybe even the next yo-yo ma. With that in mind, I tried my very best to make that come true. I practiced and played with passion, and eventually, I was the best in my beginner class. I thought since I was the best I could stop practicing and slack, but that would only work for the first year. I progressed into my seventh-grade year where I was put into the highest-level orchestra: chamber orchestra. This is where I instantly got a reality check; I found myself constantly embarrassing myself every day in front of my whole orchestra. Every day I

remember myself freezing and not playing, the moment of pure embarrassment and fright. The breaking straw was when I overheard people talking about how I could not play. This made me furious, it set off nerves that changed my work ethic. I practiced and practiced every day, so I didn't have to embarrass myself anymore. I started a new habit that made me do my best.

Throughout the years of playing the cello, I really enjoyed the experience of playing expressive music with friends. I've met many new people throughout my middle school years. Fast forward five years to high school orchestra, and I've remained optimistic about the idea of continuing the cello for the rest of my high school career. I've never realized that degrading comments and rude gestures would be in a high school orchestra. Throughout my freshman year of orchestra, I had to adapt to become a person who doesn't respond to degrading feedback. So, I learned to take the "advice" out of "the instrument isn't the problem... you are the problem" and "wow it's impossible to sound that bad." That was the breaking point of me deciding whether or not I should continue orchestra. I always wanted to stay in orchestra to remain and be close to my friends. I very much deliberated the joy I would feel to escape a mentally abusive orchestra, with the rare fun times I would experience. I thought the idea out well and decided that orchestra would be a hassle and I would no longer need the stress that it would put on with my other classes. This cello, this instrument, this abiotic object allowed me to understand the true meaning of sacrifice and allowed me to understand how to become greater as a person; because with the extra time I have, I can put towards myself with studying, hanging out with friends, and working a job. I could be a better person for my friends, my community, and my future if I sacrificed my hobby.

A true musician is not a person who just plays music, they understand when to stop playing. Many people don't know when to stop taking on activities, increasing their stress. A musician will know when it's their time to surrender their instrument and go on with life. I was faced with a situation where my life would be very complicated if I didn't put my instrument down. I was constantly told to keep playing, but what truly mattered was what I wanted. I wanted to live a life where I could manage without burdens. The moment my hobby interfered with my dreams; I dropped it. This is where I eventually found inner peace with myself and continued to live a life with more meaning and joy.

Student Name: Isabella Hage
Grade: 12
School: I H Kempner High School
Title: Octopus; a Meal or an Animal?
Category: Journalism
Key: Silver Key
Educator: Haley Grimes

As I step into the jam-packed office at 7 a.m. on the hottest day of summer, wiping the beads of sweat that glisten atop my forehead, I dread what comes next – everything – another day of tedious work. It's SUMMER... Do these people ever go home? I make my way up the spiral staircase in the center of all the chaos at Time Magazine, taking in the smells of freshly printed paper and brewing coffee. I arrive at my tiny cubicle in the corner to await my group's assignment of the day when, "clack, clack, clack" (no), as I set my bag down and look up slowly, from the corner of my eyes appears the chief editor, Susan Henson. "I have an assignment that I need done ASAP," she demands from my group leader. "I would like to have one of your group members on it." Please don't be me. "You in the blue shirt," she says as she points her index finger at me. "I want this on my desk by the end of the day." Of course. It's always me.

I come to find out, when my group leader, a tall, young woman, reads out the assignment's topic, that I would be taking on the role of an activist. The topic consisted of me taking a stance on the increasing demand for octopuses as food. I won't lie, I was puzzled as to why I should care about something that didn't even concern me. Regardless, I knew I had to do my job and get this done, so I started planning my outline. What I began to realize was that unlike other animals known to be targeted for the selfishness of humans – orcas, elephants, or rhinos – octopuses were not as popular. Don't get me wrong, I am not sweeping the pain and cruelty they experience under the rug, but my first thoughts were such. It was not until I did further research that I learned I was being ignorant.^[1]

After my outline was complete, I decided to begin conducting my research by browsing Google images in search of the worst examples of octopus cruelty. At first, all I saw was the beautiful creature swimming underwater next to colorful mountains of coral reefs, but as I scrolled further down, I understood why this assignment was necessary. Multiple photographs appeared of smiling fishermen standing next to pale purple octopuses lying upside down on a wire held in place by blue clothespins. Why are these people standing next to these dying creatures, smiling from ear to ear like Cheshire cats?^[2] Of course, they were happy; at the end of the day, they were getting a paycheck in their name, but the pictures had an unsettling quality to them.

I continued my search and came across a website of images dedicated to different social media influencers that eat octopuses alive. The website showed them grabbing the octopus, chopping off its arm, and then dipping it in a dark-colored sauce to eat it. Can the octopus feel this happening to them? Why would they eat it alive? Not only did the website include how the octopuses were eaten alive, but it also included multiple recipes for cooking the octopuses. I began to wonder why methods like boiling them alive or cutting off their tentacles before cooking them were so normalized. Images of such acts were posted all over food blogs and recipe websites. Octopuses held in tongs being submerged in steaming water, and chopped tentacles garnished in pans with lemon slices and parsley appeared with every scroll of my mouse. The octopuses were not seen as living creatures but rather as someone's pleasurable dinner.

When I think of an octopus, I think of an eight-armed purple creature that lurks in the shadows of the ocean's waters. But as I came to learn, they are much more complex. Octopuses are considered invertebrates^[3]. They are part of the smaller class phylum Mollusca, also known as mollusks, and are a part of the larger class Cephalopoda, which includes animals like squid and cuttlefish. Octopuses are found around the world, and there are about 220 classified species (Nicholson). They differ greatly in size. Some can grow to just about two inches long, while others can reach well over 30 feet. Similar to squids, octopuses have heads that are slightly separated from their bodies, with eight arms that are joined together at their base, forming what looks like a skirt. Each arm or tentacle has two sides that are filled with suction cups called suckers. Most octopuses use their arms to crawl on the bottom of the ocean floor (Britannica).

The octopus that most people know of is the *O. Vulgaris* also referred to as the "common octopus" (Boycott). This octopus is medium-sized and is found in temperate and tropical waters. It typically lives on the ocean floor, hiding along the rocky surface. The common octopus diet consists of crabs and crustaceans. Known for their intelligence, when feeling endangered, octopuses discharge inky substances that they use to sometimes paralyze their attackers. Moreover, they have the ability to change the pigment in their skin in order to camouflage themselves when in danger (Britannica). Basically, this octopus is one of the most intelligent invertebrate creatures lurking in the ocean.

As I continued my research, I remembered a specific instance where I consumed octopus. A couple of years ago, at a birthday dinner for my best friend, I was offered a piece of the grilled octopus she ordered. I took the piece and tried it. Sixteen years old and eager to tell my mom I had tried something new; I shared this experience with her. Her reaction was not what I expected. To my naive self, eating an animal like an octopus was a rare delicacy. But to my surprise, she explained how she grew up eating octopus in her home country, Lebanon.

With this information, I wanted to understand the side of people who support the eating of octopuses. Obviously, I'm not judging them; I mean I have eaten octopus too. I just wanted to see if they truly understood the conditions they went through. Proponents of

octopus farming argue it is considered sustainable, as it would lessen the pressure on hunting wild octopuses. One million octopuses are slaughtered each year, but in 2020, the overall total global catch decreased to 377,000 tons (Mishler). As octopus becomes an increasingly popular meal, the demand to catch it also increases. Moreover, other proponents of this argument suggest that octopuses make great farming animals. Octopuses have high conversion rates where they convert 50 percent of the food they ingest into flesh. Octopuses are able to gain weight rather quickly— about 2 percent every day if they are well-fed. Because of these factors, octopuses are able to reproduce quickly and produce a lot of

offspring. In return, increasing farm productivity and economic prosperity. Since they are so used to hiding in tight spaces on the ocean floor, they are

able to adapt to their captivity in confined farms (Singer and Mather). Building on this, many believe aquaculture facilities create more favorable conditions for animals than their normal habitats. This is because the farms allow them to remain hidden and in shelter, therefore avoiding danger. (Gonzalez, M. L. et al).

However, proponents of the argument for octopus farming fail to recognize how octopus farming is more beneficial to humans than to the actual animal. Those opposed to the practice argue that as more octopuses are caught, more sea animals and other fish are also being caught in order to feed the animal. About one-third of the fish caught globally is used to feed other aquatic animals in aquaculture. Due to this, overfishing has begun to increase. Not only does this impact the fish, but it also impacts the environment. Pollution from fertilizers, disinfectants, and nitrogen from feces and decomposition is released into the environment. Diseases transmitted from wild fish to octopuses are also common on farms. Furthermore, octopuses have such behavioral complexity that it has been proven they feel pain (Jaquet et al). Octopuses are slaughtered using inhumane methods. They are electrocuted with currents, clubbed to death, and cut in between their eyes.

Octopuses have three-fifths of their neurons in their arms, so when they are killed for food, they are able to feel everything done to them (Diamante). Not only do they feel

physical pain, but they also feel emotional stress. Octopus farms are associated with high mortality and aggression rates. Octopuses are known to need a highly cognitively stimulating environment to reach their full potential. So, the farm systems do not offer these attributes but instead offer extremely confined tanks with a risk of cannibalism (Jackson et al). Those arguing against octopus farming are able to recognize how much harm is truly done to the animal, all for human benefit.

Growing people's public awareness of the cruel and inhuman conditions octopuses experience on the farms will help prevent their spread. Killing octopuses and farming them not only harms that animal, but also destroys whole ecosystems and environments where the octopus played a vital role. Moreover, the main argument made against octopus farming is the abhorrent killing methods they are subjected to. As

aforementioned, octopuses can feel pain, and they can also anticipate the suffering they are about to experience in stressful situations. So, by cutting in between their eyes to destroy their brains or by passing electrical currents through their

bodies, the farms are causing octopuses to experience a multitude of negative emotions. When confined in crowded tanks under unnatural light, octopuses do

the opposite of adapting normally; they become aggressive and experience a sense of territorialism. Moreover, the constant need to reproduce in these

environments is also a cause of extreme stress (Jaquet et al). If the few octopus farms that are being built or that are already built continue to be as

successful and supported in the human world as they are today, then it will set a dangerous precedent that could have dire implications for more octopus farms being constructed in the future.

Now, I for one know this isn't a perfect world. So, the thought of all octopus farms being shut down is not a reality. However, there is a place where both sides can reach a compromise. Allowing octopus rights on these farms appears to be the most logical solution. Improving the octopuses conditions by offering them at least a little protection will help decrease the ethical questions surrounding these farms. Giving the octopuses areas to live that won't cause them emotional stress and

finding more ethical killing methods that won't cause them immense pain are just examples of the ways laws could help octopuses.

Humans are always going to want to eat octopuses, just like they do other animals. I, for one, can understand both sides of this argument. However, I do not agree with the ways in which those who farm octopuses treat them. It is our duty as human beings to care for this world and the creatures in it. Even though we are selfish by nature, we should not always put our wants before the other living beings around us. They have minds and feelings too, but just because they don't look like us does not mean they shouldn't be treated with care and respect. These animals can't stick up for themselves, so we, as humans, must work together to help stop the farms from hurting any more of these intelligent creatures, all for human satisfaction.

Student Name: Harshita Prajapati
 Grade: 11
 School: Clements High School
 Title: On Echoes; Mothers; and Rage
 Category: Poetry
 Key: Silver Key
 Educator: Glenys McMennamy

This is the body of my ancestors.
 I am proud to bear their mark, to take on their burdens.
 Some days, I humor myself their peace, our salvation.
 Something will change, with me.
 I will be Augur of a crumbling heritage Traitor, they will call me.
 Or, Herald of progress and acceptance I have become Colonizer.

I humor myself a seeker of peace.
 Yet I do not know
 Memento mori how many dead versions of myself and others
 Remember that you must die. will strew this path I walk.
 The rift is growing—
 eventually, it will call,
 and we will have to answer.

I do not know if I am ready for this lineage's reckoning.
 I can only hope I will survive,
 Saubhagyawati Bhava. that the dust will settle, and all will be well again.
 Blessings that I will never receive. Is a tense peace all I can dare to hope for?
 When will I breathe deep again,
 without fear of the ashes choking me?

—

My khandan is afraid of being forgotten.

I see the fear in their eyes There is pride there too,
As I speak, unafraid of the bite of the whip; In many.

As I speak,

Words foreign to their ears, and familiar ones, Men fear
foreign to their minds. that which they do not understand.

My power comes from the Earth on which I stand

But the Earth is my Mother Every morning I ask forgiveness

And I could not stand For my feet which tread her shoulders.

Without my Father.

His pride was one of the first.

When it breaks, a part of me will break too.

They told me,

“You will bring glory to our Name.” અમારું નામ રોશન કરીશ.

Soon they will be afraid that

I will bring only shame, and guilt, and pain.

I am afraid of this too. હું ન કરી શકું તો?

—

I will carry the weight of those forced to kneel, for those who will never be asked to.

It is past time,

That the women of this family

Demand what they are owed. This is not a time for mercy.

—

Some days I think I have never known a warm hearth before.

Other days, I remember a hearth has many forms, that do not require fire to be warm.

This is the family that has raised me, but I do not know if I was meant for them.

I am grateful, regardless.

I am sorry for the pain I will cause.

—

I will be accused of blasphemy, “Unfaithful.

of sin and wrongness and evil Led astray,

by those who said they loved me, Corrupted by Western values.”

and I will tell them: They will mourn the end of my morality.

that you were the only heaven I have ever known. They will blame my mother.

The pain of my ancestors weighs heavy,

but I walk to you now,

for those who were never given the privilege of choice,

no matter the pain of it. I hope one looks upon me now and is proud.

If I can fulfill the empty aches and unending pains

of the women who birthed me,

Perhaps my own struggle will not be in vain.

Perhaps, the deepness of this shame

is not so pervasive after all.

—

Nostalgia is for the weak.
Hopes and prayers and intimate fears—
all things better left unsaid.
Are we so scared of vulnerability?
Perhaps all I want
is to soften my shoulders
and weep into the arms of a lover
who does not require strength from me.

—

Names and claims and false ownerships.
This land was never ours to begin with.

I am a foreigner destroying the lands I so desperately ache to call home.

What child can bear to do this to its mother?
What mother is not destroyed by her child?

—

Loss of agency, loss of choice.
They only want what's best for me.
What do I know, after all, of myself?

—

They will blame my mother.

I was never an angry girl.

But they will blame my mother,

And I will show them the depths of their error.

I will show them what it means to worship a Goddess

And they will repent,

The pain in their eyes

A merciful trade

For the tears she has shed.

—

This is not a time for small things.

This is a time for RAGE and RAGING.

I crave my revenge—a feral lust has overtaken me.

I think my love has turned to rage

...

Good.

I was not meant to be digestible.

Student Name: Rosie Hong
Grade: 11
School: Clements High School
Title: Paper Boy
Category: Short Story
Key: Silver Key
Educator: Glenys McMennamy

During the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882, the Supreme Court restricted Chinese immigration, ruling an exception that children of US citizens could legally immigrate. The Chinese took advantage of this loophole by creating paper families. They built kinships with US citizens by forging paperwork and splitting apart families. When inspectors caught on, they interrogated and dug into these immigrants' livelihoods. Chinese immigrants pushed for their false identity until they blurred their own truths with lies.

*

Two summers ago, Jiejie and I ran out to the fields every night and picked a few of Ma's peaches off her tree. We flattened the crabgrass growing under, nestled our back against the trunk, split overripe peaches with our thumbs. "And Ma says she'll candy them for winter," Jiejie nudged me one night and pointed above. The peach tree was barren only after a week of our secret trips, its branches fanned out like veins, bleeding into the naked sky.

"Just tell her it was the birds," I laughed, digging thumb-sized holes near the tree trunk. When we first took peaches from Ma's tree, I had to tell Jiejie to stop worrying the whole way back. Just plant all the ones we stole. I bet at least one of them will grow. "And if it does," I reminded her, nestling the pit in the dirt. "I bet we'll repay her with twice the amount of peaches."

"And when will that happen?" Jiejie shook her head and threw her peach pit into the tall grass.

"I don't know," I told her. "Maybe next year? Maybe we can do this next summer, Jiejie."

Moonlight spilled over Jiejie's face, sticky from the juice dribbling down her cheek. She curled her body and cracked a thin smile. "Maybe," Jiejie said, her syllables curdled from mouthfuls of peach. "Maybe if the peaches grow back."

*

Jiejie's warnings of my overly ambitious peach pit plan were right all along. The next morning after that night, Ma found out about our crimes. I confessed on the porch with my hands splayed out, sticky and raw from the remains of her obliterated fruit. I promised her that all the peach pits I planted in her barren tree's place would repay her with bucketfuls. But those lies were fruitless because two summers later, none of the peach pits sprouted, and Ma's peach tree stopped bearing fruit.

"You're lucky I had enough savings," Ma spat at her half empty shelves of candied fruit. She dug into the wooden drawer and pulled out a stack of crinkled yuan. Ever since Ba was swept up by sea half a decade ago, his friend in America took pity and made room to take me into his family if Ma paid for the documentation. At that time, I was too young to deny anything, so Ma secretly racked up all the money she saved from selling stone fruit at the market to buy papers and documents. "Your paper ba. His name is Char-wols Yang," Ma whispered when she had first revealed her plans. She described how this crime was every mother's dream—how all the ayi she knew risked their lives with forged documents and sacrificed their motherhood to watch their sons thin to paper. "America," she interrupted every time I argued that it was a waste of money, "is a place where the supermarkets have roofs, and you can buy all the fruit you want in refrigerated carts." She heard this from the neighboring ayi who always bragged about sending their prosperous sons to America, paper sons who abandoned their homeland to watch their crinkled yuan harden to gold.

That night, Ma unfolded a photo of a man who looked nothing like Jiejie and I's chubby-faced Ba. His teeth were straight and pearly-white, hair parted and combed and gelled, cheekbones digging into his expressionless face. "Your paper ba," Ma nudged me. "Char-wolsYang." She always added the word "paper" to everything, as if to remind me that I was always her son—born by the fruit stand when I kicked and turned until Ma's belly swelled red and raw like a peach. That her motherhood could not be stripped across oceans. That our bloodline was thicker than the loose-leafed papers we forged. I sat next to Jiejie, and we dreamed of all the things we thought we knew about the man named Charles—his family, his village, or anything I could use to weave into a lie.

From then on, I became the son of a man named Charles Yang. I spent every night reciting his name. "Char-wols," I mouthed, stretching the syllables until my lips cracked. "Char-

wols. Char-wols." My tongue hardened with every call. What if he looks like Ba? What if he is Ba? What would I say? I would redraw the man's face in my dreams, trying to connect them to the stories of Ba's passing the ayi always gossiped about. How Ba's boat was caught in a wave, salt-slicked waters swallowing everything whole. I imagined Ba reemerging out of the waters and americanizing into the man named Charles Yang. I imagined all the things I would say to him if we reunited, all the water-gurgling shouts and choking debris I would swallow to see him again.

Each time, I woke up with my voice reduced to gasps of Are you Ba? Are you Ba? Are you Ba? Are you really Ba?

*

What Ma hated more than unsold, rottings peaches were liars, but she said that if she ever gave birth to a son who was a liar, he'd better be a good one. "Ayi," she reminded me. "Not Ma. Ayi, not Jiejie." In public, I lived as the son of a man named Charles Yang, and Jiejie and Ma became my ayi, or what I would call aunties, or what I would call strangers. "Jiejie" and "Ma" became names I mouthed at night like a sin to remember, secrets I tucked under my tongue, separated from all the things I memorized about the man named Charles Yang—his name, face, the village he lived before he immigrated. "I think it was by the harbor. His village," Ma had told me, and she handed me a pile of envelopes. "Before you leave, remember the map. Two houses right from the entrance of the harbor. This layout. Describe it." She tucked crinkled yuan in my pocket. "Exchange this when you cross the border."

Behind Ma's hesitant yet encouraging eyes, she knew all along I was a bad liar. No matter how many times I pleaded for Jiejie and her company instead of America, she knew about my dreams. How I wanted to know about all the things in America, or about all the things Ba hungered for in exchange for his life.

That night, I rested under Ma's peach tree, which was now withered into a skeleton, its trunk hollowed and cracking under my weight. Jiejie handed me a nectarine Ma bought from the market. I asked her about all the things she likes, about all the places I would wait to visit with her in America. She told me that she would keep all the things I left behind and would trade them back if she ever makes it. "Only if you don't look too much like that Char-wols. Then I won't be able to find you," she laughed. We chewed in silence, and Jiejie scooped up dirt to bury the pits.

*

In this dream, everything was alright. There were no stories of Ba's passing or recreations of Charles' face. In this dream, it was that summer before Ma's peach tree stopped bearing fruit, where Ma was back from the market and I was sitting under the tree, gorging on peaches she was supposed to candy. Above, Ma's peach tree was not a shell, its branches fanning out like veins, pulsing and alive. In this dream, everything was alright, and I slouched against the tree. Ahead of me, two figures blended into the tall grass. Ma! I called out of instinct. Jiejie! But my mouth molded into the same syllables every time. Ayi! Ayi!

Both figures loomed closer, their faces smeared in shadows. And I could not differentiate who was who.

*

"So your father is outside," the man at the interrogation center said. "Charles?"

"Charles Yang," I told him. Yes, my father, I thought. Ba. Have you seen him? Did he ever make it?

The man nodded and flipped through the documents. "I want to know more about your relationship with your father. Tell me, what was your village...like? Your home? How many people lived with you? How were the beds arranged? Your siblings? What were they like?"

In my head, I recited the exact layout I practiced countless times with Jiejie—the two daughters who were my paper sisters who were almost exactly one year apart and two and three years older than me. I thought about the harbor written in the envelopes, how Charles went out every evening with my paper sisters to fish at the dock. But then I remembered home with Jiejie and Ma, how Ma trudged the same mud path every day to the market, how she prayed her overripe stone fruit could last another day. I remembered Jiejie, our palms blistered and cracked from playing in the fields and our cheeks scarred from the tall grass. Then I remembered that maybe Jiejie was by the harbor instead of the peach tree. Then I mixed up my paper sisters' age with Jiejie—that maybe the two daughters were two and three years younger than me. I folded the corner of the ticket in my palms, crumpling it into all the things I couldn't keep in America, into all the things I left behind.

"My home is—"

*

Look right there! Do you see it? Jiejie shouted.

In this dream that was no longer mine, Jiejie tugged my shirt and pointed at the gnarled peach tree ahead. We ran to the edge of the field, pushing away the tall grass. The yuan Ma gave me was still crumpled in my pocket. I stopped and pulled it out. I waved the yuan at Jiejie, who was now far from my sight.

Jiejie! I yelled. Want to sneak into the market for popsicles? Ahead, Jiejie reappeared with Ma under the peach tree. Half of their sun-spotted faces were smeared from the sunlight's glare, the other half from shadow. Jiejie! Ma! I called again. I ran towards them. Jiejie was biting a peach, her cheeks dribbling in juice. Ma cracked into a toothless smile, and she held out an overripe peach. The fruit softened in my palms. Above, the branches drooped from all the weight, peach underbellies so round and yellowed I almost mistook it for gold.

Translations:

Jiejie: sister

Ayi: auntie

Student Name: Long Dang
Grade: 11
School: I H Kempner High School
Title: Redefined in my Own Way
Category: Personal Essay & Memoir
Key: Silver Key
Educator: Susan henson

When I was 12 years old, I based my whole identity on being a “failworker:” an individual who has thrown out every bit of effort to only receive zero recognition for their hard work. I felt lost, overwhelmed, and desperate for any ounce of validation – any sense of drive to keep going. These negative waves of emotions and the strong urge to prove myself found itself lost and in turmoil as negativity continued to plague the image of self-perfection sought by my younger self.

November 2019: coming home from school in 7th grade, I held in my right hand a sheet of paper with gold stars, all aligned within a uniform line and a sticker on the edge of the paper that reads, “magnifique! (magnificent in French).” I quickly ran home as fast as I could while feeling a rush of elation since Madame Allen had just given me stickers for excelling in my first year of French.

Walking through the front door and taking off my shoes, I ran to the kitchen while putting down my backpack on the stairs to wave at my parents what my teacher had given me. “Look at my paper! Look at my paper!”

Waiting in anticipation for a “great job!” or “I’m proud of you!” from my father, I was instead greeted with, “Will this help with the B on your last test?”

I didn’t know what to say. I stood there with my limbs frozen, spacing out, and watched my dad get back to what he was doing before. I felt like a daisy being trampled over 200 times by the wrath of despair. I was not only stripped of joy but was feeling like a failure for not putting in enough work to get a high enough grade on the last test. I thought that I could make up for my inadequacy with the stickers, but to him, the stickers meant nothing but silly little images.

I disappointingly stomped every step up the stairs to my room and slammed my door shut as I was unacknowledged for my efforts. Was my dad in a bad mood? Did he not hear what I said? Or is it just me? Pouring out these complicated emotions I felt during the moment, I revisited the memory of mine 2 months before.

September 2019: flopping onto my bed, I grabbed a pillow and shoved it in my face while screaming and letting out all my emotions into it. White noise surrounded me as stress

overtook my mental state. I hyperventilated, was soaked in sweat, and my body rolled intensely side to side on my bed. I was distressed.

Curious about what was happening, my older sister Mimi entered my room and saw me mentally breaking down after she heard me argue with our dad over my recent performance on the last test in French. Even though I tried my hardest and studied my butt off, I was 3% short of an A.

My sister snatched the test paper I had in my hand and laughed. "Bro, why are you upset? It's literally an 87," she said.

I explained how dad was clearly not happy that I didn't make an A. To him, B stood for "bad," and an A stood for "average." There was no way I was getting around his hot-headed personality. I felt so overwhelmed and stress in that moment and wanted to drop everything and give up.

"Who cares! What matters is that you tried! It doesn't matter what dad thinks because, at the end of the day, he didn't earn that number, you did."

12-year-old me didn't look at her comment as something inspirational or special. I was so blinded by the need to be praised that I only saw the existence of the letter A. However, my sister has greatly influenced me. Unlike my parents, she acknowledged the 87 that I received as something greater than how my dad saw it. She saw it as hours and hours of hard work rather than a number reciprocating my worth.

As I bring my sister's voice along with me to the present, I have applied this newfound conscious perspective to how I view success. At first, it felt hard to stray off the path of gaining a sense of validation. Validation was a way for myself to feel appreciated and belonged in the roots of my family. Moving forward, I still sometimes felt a part of myself was missing because of my past beliefs. Despite the deep talk with my sister, words are just words, and they couldn't just change my whole perception on a reality that left me in shambles since the start of school.

So, leading up to that afternoon in November 2019, I developed the insights of a growth mindset and tried my best on every school assignment. When I would receive my grade, I congratulated myself regardless of how well I did. In fact, after a whole month, I noticeably got better grades, was in a better mood, and had more self-confidence.

Reflecting on my dad's comment on how I was unable to achieve his standard of perfectionism, I decided to use my sister's inner voice and the effort put in over the past month as guidance. And in that moment when I was in my room, I began feeling lifted from the constraints of all expectations. I felt boundless and free as the voice of those efforts echoed over and over again in my head, telling me to follow my own feelings.

I was completely changed. I was not like the person I was before, seeking to gain the peak of all expectations. What only mattered from that point on was my own view of success. It

didn't matter what anyone thought of me because I have finally changed to become a better person: a person who values their own hardwork and doesn't take it for granted.

Student Name: Rosie Hong
Grade: 11
School: Clements High School
Title: Rice Paddy Palms
Category: Personal Essay & Memoir
Key: Silver Key
Educator: Glenys McMennamy

Popo is almost 85 years old, but her palms are still milky pale—soft like a newborn’s. “This is because of all the rice I’ve washed,” she says, and her laughs rattle through her toothless mouth, hands slicked in a film of chalky water. Every morning, right when the Guangdong Sun splinters through the kitchen shutters, Popo sifts rice through the cracks of her fingers, watching each grain belly flop in the bowl. She lays her palm flat over the surface and lets the faucet run like waves, turning it off when the tides reach her knuckles.

“Remember to buy this kind, Hong Jiu.” She nudges me after slipping the bowl into the rice cooker. “The best kind.” She hauls a beige bag of Calrose rice, slits open the top, and tilts it over a plastic crate. This is where she stores all her rice, and it never runs empty. “Every week I buy two more bags,” she says, tapping the crate to even the rice out. “But then I come home and the crate is still half full.”

Popo relives the same routine everyday—wake up, head to the street markets at 6 AM, buy a couple heads of Napa cabbage, try tai chi, watch a few episodes of Chinese dramas, and close bedroom lights at 8 PM. Mama says this is because Popo’s getting old. “You need to watch her more often,” she whispers. “Wash the rice so it’s ready when she comes back.” I begin to follow Popo in the kitchen, scurrying around her while she moves from stove to cutting board to faucet to fridge.

Popo always washes the rice. When she submerges her hands in the bowl, her skin softens like a child’s, aging backwards. She is no longer 84 but 14—a girl rambling about her girlhood in present tense, running her fingers through the heap of rice. Her sesame-black hair is slicked back to a ponytail, and she wears an oversized apron that drapes down to her knees. “Come here Hong Jiu,” she coos, ushering me with drenched rice-water sleeves she forgot to roll up.

Most of the time when we're cooking, I'm in charge of the scallions. Popo teaches me how to slice them paper thin—scrunch them into a tight bundle and keep the top end of the knife on the cutting board. "Only move the bottom end." She wraps her hands around mine and guides me through the leafy parts, tightening her grasp when the knife quivers. When we get to the white part of the scallion, she lets go. "Leave an inch from the roots." She grabs her terracotta pot sunbaked on the windowsill and digs a hole in the soil with her thumb. "Sometimes if you cut too close to the roots, it won't grow."

*

In America, I am an ocean away from Popo and buy my own rice. I haul bags of Calrose rice at the local supermarket, but I can't tell if they're the kind Popo likes. The only social media she uses is WeChat, so I create an account with my English name as the user. It's two syllables, but Popo spends a week trying to pronounce it during our calls. She only gets the last syllable—the "Ceee"—of my name right. "Ceee. Lu-Ceee. Lucy. Aiya," she sighs. "Too hard. Hong Jiu is so much easier." She asks me if Lucy is right, and her lips curl into a smile when I tell her that my English name doesn't even start with an L.

When I ask Mama what my actual Chinese name is, she says that I was supposed to have one, but Baba had written my name wrong when filling out the paperwork. "He wrote Hong Jiu. Red wine. We bickered about this for days. About how stupid he is to forget his own daughter's name." But eventually, they both renamed me in English, burying my Chinese name in cardboard boxes labeled with all the things we left behind for America. How easily a name can be rendered useless if it's never called.

*

Lately, I am a budding teen and have been eating out more than I should. I've neglected my stash of rice for so long weevils begin rummaging in the crates. When I show Popo, she tells me to soak the rice in water before washing it. "The weevils will float." I listen, pouring hot water and carefully picking them out, panning my palms across the surface of the waters. Popo laughs and scoots closer to the camera. "This is what happens when you don't take care of rice properly. But I guess you aren't scared of bugs. In Guangdong, this happened so often we didn't care. Tried scooping some out but a few always ended up in our bowl."

"That's funny," I joke. "From someone who washes her rice five times before cooking it."

For an English project on *The Joy Luck Club*, I am perched on the couch, iPad in my lap, and I interview Popo and ask her about her homeland, Guangdong. She tells me about her girlhood being shipped off to work in rice paddy farms—waters reaching her shins,

clay swallowing her sandals. How pigs would be shackled in their pens, and how chickens freely ranged the yard, pecking at their own feces. “The best part was washing rice. I remember I was 12 or 13. The sun baked us until we peeled. Washing rice was the best excuse for bathing my hands in cold water.”

“And what if they catch you?”

Popo curls her mouth into a damp smile. “What can they do? They can’t do anything. They named me as a lucky charm for their future son so if something happened to me...”

I scroll to the top of the notes page. The cursor blinks to the left of the question. What is the interviewee’s name?

“Zhao Di,” she says before I ask. “Bring a brother. I think it means bring a brother.”

*

Popo’s girlhood began with a bowl of wet rice. She teaches me to relive those moments of washing rice—moments where she wasn’t binded by the superstitions of elders or silenced for her ambitions. Now, I’m trying to relearn how to wash rice with Popo through calls, propping my phone against the windowsill and angling it down to the bowl. I swirl the milky water, check if the rice is submerged knuckle-deep. I slice scallions by only moving the bottom end of the knife, but I can’t cut them as thin as when Popo helped me with her grip. I string the half-cut scallions like an accordion in front of the camera. “Four years. You’ve been away for too long,” Popo complains. “This is why you’re forgetting everything I say. Coming back soon?” I laugh, blame it on the dull knife, but I don’t know what to say next—how to answer that question. Should I tell her that high school’s starting? How airplane tickets are too expensive? How my passport isn’t renewed? How it might be another four years?

“Soon,” I tell her. “I think anytime soon.”

The next few minutes are quiet—we’re too busy preparing rice to speak. I peer into the camera and see a girl on the other side who looks just like me. Two girls who were cut so close to the roots they won’t grow. Two girls who lost themselves in their names of things they weren’t meant to be—red wine and a brother who doesn’t exist. Tonight, Popo is playing with the rice—surfacing her palms against the reflection of her wrinkled face. I am

picking out the individual grains carefully, learning how to cook my meals independently. She washes rice to return to girlhood. I wash rice to leave it.

But we are watching each other, listening to the sloshing of the rice and the beeping of the cooker. This is our language.

Student Name: Irem Almus
Grade: 11
School: Clements High School
Title: The Burrito
Category: Flash Fiction
Key: Silver Key
Educator:

The tortilla alone is almost 150 calories. Beans must be closer to 200. The lettuce is only about 15—a godsend, if it hadn't been crammed next to half-melted cheese and a suspiciously pale sauce. No idea how many calories. I don't like that.

Mom sucks in her teeth. "Eat," she tells me. "Nothing bad will happen if you do. Just eat it. Please."

I raise my eyes—anything to avoid looking at the stupid bulging burrito. She's playing with the cross hanging from her neck. She's never been real religious, but after I collapsed in the tub and the hospital had to stick ten different IVs in me, something snapped inside of her and now she goes to church two times a week.

Eyes back on the burrito. I press my legs together, and there's barely any give. By now my legs are little more than bone and sinew. And that's how I like it.

But Mom is looking at me. In that desperately pleading way of hers, like a kicked puppy.

I tear a bit of the tortilla off. It flaps between my fingers. I place it carefully in my mouth, swallowing before I can convince myself not to.

Back at the hospital, my therapist had asked me if I really thought a slimmer body would make me happier. "You're 78 pounds right now," she had said, as if I hadn't seen that number written on a thousand different forms by Mom's shaking hand, "and I'm guessing your goal is 75. When you're 75, will you be okay with staying there? Or will you start thinking that you'll only really be happy if you can get down to 70?"

I take the burrito in both hands, because that's how heavy it is, holding it delicately. Like it might burn me. My eyes catch on the dips and rises of my hands, knuckles and joints jutting out like knobby hills. The burrito dwarfs my wrist, and the bracelet I put on this morning is sliding down to midarm. Skin is stretched like plastic wrap over my wrist, the bones close to snapping through. I feel a sudden revulsion.

I used to be revolted by everything about me. I felt my thighs chafe against each other with every step I took and I had to swallow down bile. I felt the soft rise of my belly press into any surface I leaned over and had to hold back a gag. Anytime I raised an arm, I'd had to avert my gaze from the dangling fat, lest I heave. There was a terrible hypersensitivity inside me, finely attuned to every swell and curve and rise in my body, and I couldn't focus on anything but imagining that fat sloughing off with every passing minute that I allowed my stomach to remain empty.

No, it was never about being more happy or less sad. It was about trying to tolerate myself, I think, trying to coexist with my body without wanting to worm my way out of it.

Inch by inch, the burrito approaches my mouth. My stomach lashes left and right. Sweat pricks my skin. And then my teeth are slipping into the softness and biting a piece away and my throat works, trying its best to push the food out, but I swallow anyway.

Mom's eyes are wide with amazement.

I'm hungry. God. I am so hungry. I haven't been full for two years and it feels like a lifetime. My stomach is growling, begging for more. Saliva convalesces in my mouth.

I take another bite, and it slips past my tongue too quickly. Another bite. And then another. I am ferocious, yanking pieces off like a starving animal. It's only when I go for another one and find only air that I realize I'm done.

I stare at the empty plate, my empty hands. My vision tilts dangerously. I feel all 500 calories of that burrito shift, click, settle in my stomach.

Mom is grinning widely. "Good job, honey. This is so great. Good job."

"Yeah," I say faintly. "I—I'm gonna go to the restroom now, Mom."

I run more than walk there. My stomach glugs with the weight of the burrito and I swear I can feel the distance between my thighs drawing together, can feel my stomach growing and poking out of the fabric of my shirt. I land on the floor, right in front of the toilet, and stick a finger into my mouth.

I'm not a puker, usually. But I need to get this invader in my body out.

I touch the back of my mouth and push until I can feel the gag reflex working. Liquid slugs its way up to my throat. My finger has hardly left my mouth before vomit spews out and into the toilet bowl.

I heave and gag until everything is out and my stomach feels painfully hollow, then gag a few times after that just to make sure.

A creak. I look up to see the door swinging open, Mom staring at me. Her hands are on her cross again.

Behind her, I can see my reflection in the full-length mirror. I am sweaty and pale, with hair so thin it nearly shows my scalp and eyes as sunken as a skull's. My shoulders come up as if to protect me from the sight of myself, but they're too narrow to really do much.

"It's okay," Mom says. I wonder who she's trying to convince, because we both know that's a lie. "Setbacks happen. Recovery doesn't mean anything without setbacks. I'll just—I'll pray more. I will. And you'll try harder. Right? Promise me you'll try harder, honey."

I say nothing. Instead, I lean against the toilet again, wrapping my arms around my waist, running my fingers over each and every rib. I chew slowly, even with nothing in my mouth, tasting the aftermath of the bile.

Student Name: Bilal Khan

Grade: 11

School: Clements High School

Title: The Digital Pulse: AI's Role in Healthcare.

Category: Poetry

Key: Silver Key

Educator:

In the realm of healing, where science and heart entwine,
A new chapter unfolds, with Artificial Intelligence as its design.
Gentle whispers of progress, in corridors lined with care,
A beautiful symphony of technology and human flair.

In laboratories silent, machines hum with thought,
Crafting solutions, with the wisdom they have been taught.
They delve into mysteries, where human eyes falter,
Unlocking secrets, on the biomedical altar.

With algorithms precise, like a surgeon's hand,
AI guides the healers, in this complex land.
In diagnostics' maze, it's a luminous guide,
Finding paths unseen, where solutions reside.

Through data vast as oceans, it sifts with grace,
Bringing forth patterns, no human could trace.
Predicting and modeling, with an unseen art,
In the canvas of healthcare, AI plays its part.

In the dance of molecules, and life's intricate play,

AI's insight brings a new light to day.

Personalized treatments, tailored and keen,

A future of medicine, once only dreamed.

Yet, in this fusion of silicon and soul,

A balance we seek, to reach our goal.

For machines may learn, predict, and aid,

But human touch, in healing, must never fade.

So here's to the future, bright and unknown,

Where AI and medicine, together have grown.

A journey of empathy, science, and care,

In the quest for healing, an unparalleled pair.

For in this blend of technology and human endeavor,

Lies a promise of health, better than ever.

A testament to progress, compassion, and skill,

In the art of healing, AI fulfills.

Student Name: Crystal Fu
Grade: 12
School: William B Travis High School
Title: The Dog
Category: Poetry
Key: Silver Key
Educator:

When she's away, I wait and wait

And hope that she will not be late.

The house is big, without a sound.

My barks in empty space resound.

I pace the floor, stare at the walls.

I walk suddenly quiet halls.

My bowl is barren, water warm.

Thoughts like restless sparrows swarm.

But then – but then – I hear the crunch

Of gravel like a sucker punch

To my ecstatic senses when

Staccato footsteps narrow in

And you come up to the front door -

And I can't wait a second more -

To see your face, to scent your hands

That smell sweet like familiar lands -

To nuzzle weary feet that roam

Far but always return back home.

Student Name: Zaid Kaleemullah
Grade: 11
School: I H Kempner High School
Title: The Effects of Social Media and Adolescent Brain Development
Category: Critical Essay
Key: Silver Key
Educator: Susan henson

Introduction

The notion of technology has brought forth various changes in modern society, including the increased use of social media platforms. Currently, more than 23% of the global population utilizes social media. (Montag et al.). Although social media provides a means for people to connect and interact with others, it has also been associated with possible adverse effects on health. One explored aspect is that excessive social media use impacts the nucleus accumbens of adolescents, which plays a crucial role in reward processing and motivation. According to research at Princeton University, photographs displayed increased neural activity in several brain regions, including the nucleus accumbent (Lauren et al).

Additionally, this area exhibited reduced activation of neural regions typically associated with cognitive control. Dr. Andrew Doan, a respected neuroscientist and author, cautioned about the dangers of excessive social media use on the brain, stating, "Excessive screen time and social media can have detrimental effects on our brain and mental well-being" (Doan and Strickland).

As social media use becomes more ubiquitous, concerns have been raised about its potential

effects on the brain. Due to the lack of regulation or legal guidance regarding social media usage,

individuals must be aware of its potential impact on their brain health and proactively limit their usage. This evaluation raises the question of to what extent excessive

social media use in adolescents alters the nucleus accumbent. Overall, an analysis through the

scientific, medical, and psychological angles displays that addressing the social media crisis will

necessitate significant medical interventions and regulations. These will ultimately help decline

to provide the necessary research to aid those experiencing mental defects.

Mental Health Effects

The health effects of social media hold various consequences per individual, but they are nonetheless profound. Most notably, social media directly alters brain functions, which include

parts of the nucleus accumbens. Recent research by Manduca suggests that the nucleus accumbens core, a brain region associated with pleasure and reward, may play a key role in

regulating adolescent social behavior through the interaction between cannabinoid and opioid

receptors (Manduca et al.). Excessive use of social media can significantly affect individuals and

society, highlighting the need to better understand social media's effects on the brain and develop

strategies to mitigate its negative impact on mental health.

Limiting Social Media Usage

From a scientific perspective, research indicates that adolescents who excessively utilize social media demonstrate modifications in the brain's reward system, specifically in the nucleus

accumbens. For example, a study by Kuss and Griffiths found that excessive social media use

can activate the brain's reward centers similarly to drug use, leading to addictionlike behaviors

and altering the reward system among adolescents. Furthermore, the study suggests that this

activation can lead to the release of dopamine, a neurotransmitter associated with pleasure and

reward, reinforcing the behavior and contributing to addictionlike symptoms. Outside of academic settings, the negative impacts of social media overuse can also extend to other areas of

life. Social media use can distract users from their surroundings and impair their judgment,

leading to dangerous situations (Bernhardt et al.). Excessive social media usage can result in

fatigue and cognitive overload among adolescents, leading to academic errors and decreased

school performance. Suppose schools must address this issue and help students manage their

social media usage. In that case, students may make costly mistakes that impact their academic

performance and future opportunities and success.

Social Media Addiction

According to a study by Montag published in Behavioral Brain Research, excessive social media use can negatively impact the brain's reward system. This can result in addictionlike behaviors, including difficulty with impulse control and increased risk-taking behaviors. Given that social media is often accessed through smartphones, it is essential to consider how

using these devices can impact an adolescent's sleep hygiene. Experts recommend good sleep

hygiene practices to maximize resting time, which could help mitigate the negative impacts of

excessive social media use on the developing brain (Montag et al.). However, these methods

ignore the time constraints attributed to many adolescents who excessively use social media and

do not sufficiently alleviate the disruptions it can cause. For example, practicing good sleep

hygiene can be less effective due to the stimulation and engagement with social media, as

mentioned by (Sherman et al.). An unbiased study conducted by Twenge and Campbell also

suggests that excessive social media use can lead to increased anxiety and depression in adolescents, further disrupting their circadian rhythm and sleep patterns.

Despite the potential risks associated with excessive social media use, adolescents spend more

time online. The allure of likes, comments, and virtual validation can create a robust addictionlike response in the developing brain, leading to potentially harmful behaviors and long-term

health consequences (Sherman et al.). As a result, adolescents who prioritize social media use

over other activities may be more susceptible to adverse outcomes such as decreased academic

performance, reduced social interaction, and increased risk-taking behaviors.

Mental Health Effects of Social Media

Most adolescents have some degree of social media use, which can affect their long-term brain development. However, some of these individuals, especially those who excessively use

social media, have habits that extend into various aspects of their lives. Researcher Christian

Montag and his team found that prolonged social media use activates the reward system in the

brain, which can lead to addictionlike behaviors and alterations in the reward system, potentially

impacting academic performance and social interaction and increasing risky behavior in adolescents (Montag et al.). These effects on the developing brain highlight the harm of excessive social media use that has not yet been fully mitigated.

The extensive use of social media among adolescents has generated worries regarding its possible influence on their neural development. For example, according to a study published in

Psychological Science, the number of likes an adolescent receives on social media posts can

activate the nucleus accumbens, similar to receiving a monetary reward (Sherman et al. 2017).

This suggests that social media use can significantly impact the neural pathways involved in

reward processing and potentially contribute to addictive behaviors. Furthermore, many studies

have found that excessive social media use is linked to adverse adolescent outcomes, including

anxiety, depression, and poor academic performance (Twenge & Campbell; Lin et al.). This can

lead to altered reward sensitivity and impulsive behavior in adolescents, potentially increasing

the risk of substance abuse and addiction. Therefore, parents and educators must monitor adolescents' social media use and promote healthy habits to mitigate these potential risks.

Developmental Effects of Social Media

From a neurological perspective, many researchers suggest that excessive social media use can alter adolescents' Nucleus Accumbens, potentially increasing their risk of developing

mental health issues and affecting their academic performance. According to recent research,

excessive social media use has been linked to changes in the nucleus accumbens of adolescents.

For example, a study in the Journal of Neuroscience revealed a correlation between regular

social media usage and heightened gray matter in the nucleus accumbens, which may result in

addictionlike behavior (Sherman et al.). Furthermore, a study published in JAMA Pediatrics

provides further evidence of the association between social media use and increased depressive

symptoms among adolescents. This reinforces the potential detrimental impact of excessive

social media usage on the mental health and brain development of adolescents, emphasizing the

need for continued investigation and implementation of preventative measures.

Mitigating Social Media Consequences

Excessive social media use's impact on adolescents' nucleus accumbens is a growing mental health concern. While social media can have benefits, such as facilitating communication

and information-sharing, it has also been linked to adverse effects on mental health, particularly

in younger populations. Erik Bender discusses how social media use can harm mental health.

(Bender). The nucleus accumbens produces feelings of pleasure and reward, and it can become

overactive when exposed to social media for extended periods. This can lead to addictionlike

behaviors and decreased ability to feel joy from other activities. This can be particularly concerning in adolescents as their brains are still developing and more susceptible to these

changes. Excessive social media use may interfere with the normal development of the reward

system, leading to long-term negative consequences for mental health. It is essential for parents

and caregivers to be aware of these potential risks and to encourage healthy social media habits

in children and teenagers. This can lead to addictionlike behaviors and decreased ability to feel

pleasure from other activities. This can be particularly concerning in adolescents as their brains

are still developing and more susceptible to these changes. Excessive social media use may

interfere with the normal development of the reward system, leading to long-term negative

consequences for mental health. It is essential for parents and caregivers to be aware of these

potential risks and to encourage healthy social media habits in children and teenagers. To mitigate the potential negative impact of social media on adolescent mental health, the government could regulate social media use by limiting teenagers' time spent on these platforms.

Various studies have demonstrated that prolonged exposure to social media can result in addictionlike symptoms and alterations in brain chemistry, such as amplified activity in the nucleus accumbens.

Conclusion

Implementing time restrictions on social media usage for adolescents by the government could aid in reducing the likelihood of addiction and related negative mental health consequences. Another possible regulatory approach is to mandate social media platforms to

incorporate warnings or notifications regarding the potentially harmful effects of excessive use

on mental health. This could include reminders to take breaks or limit usage and information

about resources for seeking help if needed. These measures aid in heightening awareness about

the potential hazards related to social media usage and encouraging more responsible online

behavior. Additionally, the government could allocate funding for research into the long-term

impact of social media use on mental health, improving understanding of potential risks, and

informing future policy decisions. However, it is essential to recognize that implementing regulations to limit social media use can be challenging, particularly given these platforms.'

popularity and widespread use. As a result, it may be challenging to enforce such regulations,

and there is the potential for unintended consequences, such as pushing adolescents to seek out

unregulated or less healthy alternatives to social media. Therefore, any regulations should be

carefully considered and balanced with efforts to educate adolescents about beneficial social media

use and provide access to resources for mental health support. A vital factor in mitigating the

adverse effects of social media on adolescent mental health is the involvement of parents, in

addition to government regulation and education. Given parents' influence on their children's

behavior, they can set an example by modeling healthy social media use and alternative activities, which can help reduce adolescents' time on these platforms.

Furthermore, parents can establish guidelines and boundaries around social media use, such as setting time limits or restricting access to devices during certain times of the day. Parents can also encourage healthy social media habits by monitoring their children's online

activity, fostering open communication, and providing support when needed. It is essential to

acknowledge that social media platforms can confer several benefits to adolescents, including

providing opportunities for social connection and access to information. Thus, it is crucial to

promote a balanced approach to social media use that focuses on healthy habits and the responsible consumption of online content. However, prolonged exposure to social media has

been linked to changes in brain chemistry and addictionlike symptoms. Such effects have also

been associated with increased symptoms of depression in this population (Riehm et al.). Parental

involvement is crucial in promoting responsible social media use and mitigating adverse impacts

on adolescent mental health (Viner et al.). Together, these strategies could help raise awareness

and improve understanding of the potential risks associated with social media use while promoting healthier online behaviors and supporting positive mental health outcomes. By

fostering a healthy relationship with social media, adolescents can reap the benefits of these

platforms while avoiding the negative consequences of overuse.

Student Name: Jesse Phung
Grade: 11
School: I H Kempner High School
Title: The Evolution of Me
Category: Personal Essay & Memoir
Key: Silver Key
Educator: Susan henson

Who am I? I'm an evolving foreigner, paving the way for the future generations of the Phung family. My evolution derives from my frowned-upon conformity to cultural norms, revealing the differences within my multifaceted identity— resulting in lasting impacts on my future, and beyond.

As the only first-generation male child from parents who made the ultimate journey across the Atlantic, the desire to continue our legacy while rooting the American Dream was their ultimate goal. As they fled during the Vietnam War, they sought opportunities for a better life, to raise children, and to thrive where chances were plentiful. They largely succeeded, and for that, my sisters and I are beyond appreciative. Their home country and the traditions and cultures that they nurtured within us make up the Chinese that I am. This aspect of my identity has been largely viewed in conjunction with the stereotypes of our Asian values.

One key value was education. Growing up, the household expectation has always been to be straight-A, join all the clubs, and take advantage of the opportunities that present themselves. Even starting in elementary, I joined the student council in 3rd grade because my dad would continue to push me to be more involved at school. Growing into middle school, I was forced to join the math team, putting in countless hours at dreaded weekend competitions I was supposedly destined for only to lose by landslides by what seemed to be little Einstein prodigies (I only went to them because my dad would get me McDonalds those mornings.) I never put much effort into these competitions and never had the desire to win. I knew I couldn't. I wasn't the ideal Asian genius. I only went to make my dad content and to say that I tried, conforming to the culturally desired version of me.

But not only did culture shape my identity through education, it did so through traditions, foods, and expectations, as well. From celebrating Chinese New Years with my grandparents at the temple as a child, to eating Peking Duck around the Lazy Susan, my identity is full of my native roots. This side of my identity comes with strict cultural expectations such as working in the medical or computer science fields, or factoring Feng shui and the color red into our environments. These I am obligated to fulfill—to meet my parent's expectations—and succeed beyond them by having greater access to the opportunities of America.

I conformed to these standards of my Chinese heritage: but, obviously, being born in America, I'm not only made up of my Asian side. Growing up in an Americanized society, my identity began to shape itself, making me realize that I'm much more than the cookie-cutter projection of my Asian values. As time progressed, I began to conform, whether I wanted to or not; allowing me to evolve and develop. However, although conforming is natural, it is often looked down upon as it shows how easy it is to be influenced and how it takes away from someone's traditional identity. To my family, I was being "whitewashed," reminding them that they will never have a purely Chinese son, one whose cultural roots fully shine through. But one's identity is made up of a lot more than just tradition—the intertwining of new and old ideas, beliefs, and values create one's true identity. And while American standards have diluted my native identity, succumbing to Americanization has created my own, true identity.

Being American in the land of opportunities has introduced me to new traditions like Christmas, Halloween, Thanksgiving, and so much more that will create a lasting impact on myself, and the family I raise later in life. At the same time, this buries the significance and dilutes the initial cultural ties with the Lunar New Year and events like the Dragon Boat Festival which begin to fade away. Being American has introduced me to new songs such as country and rap, which are vastly different from the once Asian playlists filled with Chinese songs my grandma loves listening to. Being American has opened me to new jobs and industries like aviation and business, which step me further and further from the pre-determined identity in medical, engineering, or computer science. Being American has introduced me to a new perspective of the world, and ultimately blends with my native culture to make me who I am today, influencing the generations of tomorrow.

I'm an evolving foreigner—and being American only means that I reside in the United States. Being American doesn't dictate my culture, who I am, or what I value or aspire in life. Like Legos, each a unique color and shape, my Asian—and American—aspects stack together as the building blocks of my identity. As I age and become more integrated into the American standard, the music, the culture, and the traditions, my American self pieces themselves within my Asian self, creating none other than me. This 'me' may not be the Jesse my ancestors intended me to be—and that's okay. Conformity is inevitable, and it only further proves that one's identity is ever-changing in an ever-changing world.

These evolving identities make each individual unique, allowing for the diversity we have in today's society. As we embrace our differences, we begin to notice how evolution, like natural selection, unites the best of us in a combined world. Although conformity is viewed down upon, the complexity resulting from it allows for each person to shine in their varying aspects. Each person's greatness comes in their own form, but for me, it's the combined aspects of my Asian culture and Americanization which have shaped me to who I am today, impacting my future.

Student Name: Sophia Liu
Grade: 10
School: Clements High School
Title: The Flowers and Birds are Wind-blown
Category: Short Story
Key: Silver Key
Educator: Stephanie Yang

Mom blooms as if to celebrate my leaving.

She's watering a potted peace lily when I enter the living room. The lily was mine, once, but had wilted from my touch. Then Mom took it, taught it how to birth a life. Chlorosis trickled out of flower veins and turned to ivory. Now, its petals tremble like waving white flags. I think that's why I can't be a gardener: I see surrender where Mom sees the end of a war.

"Did you finish packing?" Mom asks, setting down the watering can.

"Mhm, almost."

"That's good." She nods, politely. A hush settles into the walls. I watch as a droplet slides against the peace lily's side.

"My flight is at eight tomorrow," I offer. Mom turns to look at the flower, too, before she speaks.

"Are you ready?"

I think of our little house: the empty driveway, the stillness in the evenings, and the sand-colored bricks. I think of Mom with a dandelion stem looped around her ear, its bud brushing her temple like a kiss.

"Yes," I tell her. She lets her finger trace the edge of a leaf.

"You've always done well on your own," Mom says.

Her eyes squint a bit, and the corners of her mouth curve, but it's not quite a smile. She picks up the watering can again. Splashing fills the room, sweetly.

"Yeah," I whisper. The sound evaporates within stream.

A cloud shifts outside, lets sunlight fall through the window. Air is blurred to mist. My tongue condenses sticky in its hesitance, and I'm unsure where to lay my words.

"I'm going to look over everything again." I try to be soft.

"Okay." Mom doesn't look back.

There are sentences to gift to mothers, but I am not fluent in daughterhood. I could give her an afterimage wrapped in sand-colored brick, tied with ribbons of vine, though. I could lay it to rest in her hands and forget the route home.

I go out to the backyard.

The picket fence is worn to yellow. The lawn is trimmed neat. In the plant beds, crabgrass sprawls like a splayed hand: hopeful. Mom used to take the garden scissors and snip them short on occasion. She never weeded them— just left the roots in soil and furrowed her brow when she saw them grow again.

We have workers who come to mow the backyard, but it costs extra for weeding. Mom's job didn't pay very much, so she took on more shifts. Then, she didn't have time to mow the lawn, so she hired the gardeners. After paying the gardeners, she worked more hours to make up for going over the landscaping budget. Crabgrass has never been in the budget.

Sometimes, I uproot the weeds while Mom is gone. My fingers twist through the rigid stems, and I practice letting go of entanglement. Mom doesn't notice. She doesn't tend the backyard anymore, either. It would be easier to throw away the plant beds, but I want to preserve them in their decay— nurture mess as a flower.

It's not an unfamiliar feeling: when I crouch down and start to dig.

"Do you like gardening?" I asked Mom ten summers ago.

"I've been taking care of these plants for years now," — she pressed her finger to my forehead, and I giggled— "some of them are older than you." After her hand trailed away, I felt the indent of dirt still stuck to my skin. I swiped at my brow bone. "And you?"

"Nope," I hummed, "it's too much work."

"That's alright." She kept digging at the little hollow in the ground. "You can go find something to put in the box, then, while I finish this up."

"Okay." I pushed myself off the grass and toddled across the backyard.

It was July. The heat felt close to the ground, and a bead of sweat salted my cheek. My feet spilled over the seams of the earth.

I reached for the closest flower. It was a carnation— pale under the light, glistening wetly like snow. I twisted it until its stalk wrinkled, and then pulled it off completely.

"Is this pretty?" I held it out to Mom after walking back. The blossom stood primly: spine gently sloped, head curved.

"Very pretty." She smiled at me and turned to digging again.

"When did you plant these, Mama?"

"The carnations? About three years ago, I think. You were there at the supermarket when I bought the seeds." The warmth was too mellow, too muddling for me to recall anything. The roundness of world lulled me into a daze— all soft corners.

"Do they grow every year?" I asked instead. Mom's garden was habitual with its metamorphosis. A shifting palette of colors danced atop greens. Bushes and plants grew along the fencing. Closer to the house, the fruits of nature leveled into a small meadow. I had thought that beautiful things were born to be fleeting— gone in one memory so we would mourn the moment before.

"Usually they come back every summer, but these ones are older and nearing their last bloom." Mom finished shoveling and took off her gloves. She laid onto the silken lawn. Her eyes closed. "It's so hot."

"Uh-huh," I sighed. I placed the carnation next to my feet and sat down. I tore a blade of grass from its root, fiddled with it. "Well, why aren't you a gardener if you plant so much?"

Mom stretched her arms up above her. "Gardeners don't make a lot of money," she said, "and I'd hate it if I had to do it."

"Me too," I agreed. I looked to the pit Mom dug. I studied the cherry tomatoes surrounding it, the sunflowers at its side. "Where's the tin?"

"It's by the hole," Mom answered. She turned onto her side. We fell quiet then, and I rested for a moment. The seventh month was delicate— touching us only with tufts of scattered birdsong. I tried to mold my breath to Mom's. As everything slowed, I shifted toward the pit. There was a rectangular container beside it. When I flipped open the metal lid, light gleamed off its smoothness. I blinked and reached behind me for the carnation, before placing the flower inside.

A melody chimed through the afternoon. Mom sat up and pulled out her phone. As she read the screen, I tucked the box into the hollow like an edging root. I heard her fingers clicking a response.

"Mama has to go to work for a bit," she said. She dragged herself to standing, and I stared up at her. Mom swiveled toward the house. Then, she paused and turned back to me. Her lips parted, but I didn't want to hear of transience. I clasped her wrist.

"Can you stay until we finish?" Mom's tongue stilled between her teeth. Her dark pupils flitted to the house again.

“Sorry.” She tugged from my grasp. “Leave it there if you want, we can do the rest when I get home.” She scrambled for the door. “There’s tea in the kettle,” Mom called. “Warm it up, warm the house up.” The walls crackled under sun: peeling paint and falling petals. I didn’t know what she meant. As Mom swept down the hall, I stayed silent. I watched how the wind clung to her hair, how it pulled away.

After she left, I stayed in the garden and grazed topsoil over the bleared ridge at my feet. It powdered onto the cover of the tin. Silver faded to brown. The grass where Mom had stretched across was matted— as if even her going lingered.

One winter, I fluttered awake to Mom’s footsteps: a return. Mom always came back during Blue Hour, while the robins were still sleeping. Then, she would leave when the sun had scarcely begun its climb upwards.

I got out of bed and wandered to the living room. Mom wasn’t there. It was cooler than usual, and a chill slipped past. The door was left ajar, unfurling.

I stepped closer, until the yard fit neatly within the doorframe— sky-lit but dim. Mom stood in front of her favorite plot of land. Poppies stroked her ankles.

“Ma?” I called. Her head flicked towards me. The dawn touched her cheeks blue, wet. She sniffed once. Her hand reached up and wiped at her eyes.

“Sorry,” she explained, “Mom’s just a little tired.” I shivered, and I saw that Mom did too.

“It’s cold outside,” I said.

“Yeah, it’s still early. Go back to sleep before you get sick.”

I kept looking at her from the doorway. “Go back to sleep,” Mom repeated. Her white nightgown quivered behind her— the edges dampened by first dew.

“You too,” I yielded after a moment. Mom thought about it, gazed at me.

“I’ll come in after you.” Tiny drops of water hung off the bushes and Mom’s eyelashes.

“Okay.” She turned to the poppies again. They twirled red.

Halfway to my room, I glanced over my shoulder. I couldn’t see Mom through the doorframe anymore. Then I kept walking, and morning’s cling was left at my back.

The day of the Spring Equinox, I dialed Mom.

“Hello?” I heard over the landline.

“Are you still at work?” I hadn’t seen Mom in two weeks.

“Yeah, is something wrong?”

“No,” — I glanced at the barren kitchen around me, tongued the lack of noise— “we’re just almost out of tea.”

“I’ll buy some at the store,” Mom responded.

“You said that last week.”

“Ah, sorry. I forgot to.” Mom rustled around on the other side, talking in static. “I’ll come back earlier tonight, okay? We can plant your favorite flowers again— like last year.”

“Okay,” I agreed. We had sown roses, used blood to dampen thorns.

“Okay, I’ll see you soon. I need to go now, but take care of yourself, alright? Water the garden if you can. Love you.”

“Bye,” I said. The call ended.

Hours later, the Equinox had faded, and Mom hadn’t returned yet. I sat in the grass and stared at the faint shadows of vegetation— veiled by gray and moon. My legs soaked in the dirt. I had watered the backyard that afternoon, trimmed fledgling branches, cut a house shaped in neatness. I left a home for the roses.

My eyelids rippled as they closed. I tried to tell them that Mom and I were going to plant the roses soon, but they yielded to dream anyways.

When I awoke, the driveway was vacant, and the house was calm. Mom still wasn’t back, then. It was darker than before. My limbs were tacky and hot alongside the night. My neck ached because of the cold, and my joints stiffened in fever.

I extended my hand until it caressed the fringe of a flower. The petals were tender against my knuckle. They smiled at me, moonlit. I clutched at the flower’s stem and pulled. An owl cooed from afar.

The fragile column of plant gave way, and I threw it aside. My throat burned as I reached for another. I pulled it out too— spine bending with the stem. I plucked a bundle of leaves off by the branch. In another palm, I crushed the pulpy core of a peony.

Then, I was tired again. I sank downward. My hands sagged into the ground. I clawed at the roots of the flowers and tugged them apart in fistfuls. They cleaned my palms of dirt, washed them in scrapes instead. I listened to the owl's lullaby as my arms ached.

The next sunrise, I found a bag of tea on the countertop and Mom's room empty again. I brewed a packet. The chrysanthemums budded in my cup, gold. When I gazed out the window, I saw corpses of flora stippling the ground, wilted by water. Tree pollen swirled down with the morning currents. They settled atop where feeble petals lay dying. The garden was a mess. It didn't feel like a battle won; it felt like carnage.

After that day, Mom stopped coming back early. The lawnmowers were hired, and I'd spend my days wondering if they even knew how to salvage wreckage.

Soil unfurls— offering itself as an object of dissection, an organ to be gouged. My fingertips dampen as I reach within it. The edge of the container is slippery, its corners smooth. I can't grab it. Mom's shadow glides over me as I try. She's followed me to the backyard, too.

"What are you doing?" she asks. I take the trowel from where it sinks into leafage and press it against the beating ground.

"I'm taking out the capsule." I'm not wearing gloves, and my hands make untidiness of themselves: mud-stained.

"What capsule?"

"The one we buried a few years ago. You said it was a keepsake, or something." The metal of the shovel clinks on the box. Its walls scratch from sharpness.

"Oh," Mom answers. I don't ask if she remembers. "Do you need help?"

"No, it's okay."

I'm tearing at the crabgrass roots, trying to unravel where they wrap around the container. The sound of small rips tremor through the silence. Mom's inhales stream like wind. Her silhouette sways on the ground, with the rustling of the leaves.

"I haven't come out here in a while," Mom notes and sniffs mildly. The day shines white, but the air is crisp. "The plant beds have really been taken over. I'll need to get rid of them some time."

“You could weed them,” I tell her, “give them another use.”

“Like what?”

I wedge the shovel beneath the tin and start pushing it up. The wind blows again—earnest.

“Whatever you want. Vegetables, maybe.” I glance at Mom. Her eyes are unfocused, thinking.

“Yeah. I mean, I don’t know. You wouldn’t be here to eat them.”

“I guess not,” I concede. Then, I go back to twisting the shovel. I wait for Mom to say something else; I don’t say anything at all. Swallows soar to another edge of sky, twittering. The breeze must taste better elsewhere.

Sediment crumbles off the container, and I pull it from its resting place. Flecks of rust dapple across the watery surface. Its reflection has dulled since burial, in the way all ponds age cloudy. I open the tin.

“What’d you put in here?” Mom blossoms through the quiet.

“A carnation.” I squint at the box. “I don’t know why. It was a little impractical.”

Inside the tin, there’s nothing except a smudged line. Vestiges settle at the bottom only to show an absence of what once was— a life lived in missing.

“Well,” Mom says, “all flowers return to soil, one day.”

Student Name: Preston Trinh

Grade: 11

School: I H Kempner High School

Title: The Land of Opportunity

Category: Poetry

Key: Silver Key

Educator: Susan henson

Look around, and who do you find unique,
many people not like you and me,
no matter where they are from,
if they are a woman, or a bum, they shall be
accepted with open hands.
Give them a chance,
and open your mind to understand, just like
the green statue stands, silent and tall, lighting the
gates to freedom for everyone and all; across the sea
in the foreign lands we will find, ones who
falter for help, will our proud nation rise to
the occasion? Who will know because our
land of opportunity does not know.
Overall, who we call ourselves, Americans,
but should we, knowing the cries for help ignored,
our sacred lands fight for equality and justice, yet
sometimes we fund the ones who erase that all.
America is different from what it once was, no
one cares about others, until they plead on
our doorsteps, begging for help, covered in corruption
and what America has done. How the ideals of

“fighting for freedom” have turned to fighting for the economy. Where freedom and equality isn't number one. Where money is the same as freedom and equality.

Student Name: Sophia Liu

Grade: 10

School: Clements High School

Title: The Nymphs of Pornography: An Analysis of Sexual Violence in Explicit Videos

Category: Critical Essay

Key: Silver Key

Educator: Stephanie Yang

The Emergence of Erotica

“If your streams have divine power change me, destroy this beauty that pleases too well!”

—Daphne, to Peneus

A girl drags her grief to the riverside. A girl begs to be washed away, for her body to slip like water— out of grasp. In Ovid’s Greek epic, the *Metamorphoses*, Daphne runs from the pursuits of Apollo. The nearby river god then turns her into a laurel tree as a means of escape. Since Ovid’s time and the start of the Common Era, sexual violence has been represented in multiple modes of media. Now, its accessibility has further proliferated through the medium of pornography.

The consumption of pornography is a topic addressed seldom and with equivocation, yet a process pervading in physicality. The rates of use for men vary between 50% to 99%, and the rates for women are from 30% to 86% (Tolman et al). Additionally, 11% of men and 3% of women believe they have an addiction to pornography (Grubbs et al. 88). In a time of digitalization, these numbers are spurred by the rise of the internet. Since 2004, “the estimated number of general population members viewing pornography on the Internet increased over three times” (Lewczuk). As such, it becomes increasingly critical to analyze the implications of pornography intake. In tandem, the nuances within varying societal scales should be observed. Consistent use affects individuals to isolated extents. As these effects compile, conceptual influences emerge across a culture. Significantly, consumption of pornography has led to the normalization of sexual violence— particularly against women.

Analyzing the Media

“So the virgin and the god: he driven by desire, she by fear.”

A continuity across pornographic material is the depiction of sexual violence. In an examination of popular explicit videos, it was found that “88.2% [of scenes] contained physical aggression ... while 48.7% of scenes contained verbal aggression” (Bridges et al). These scenes are often imitations of authentic proceedings, with minute exaggerations. The modifications compound and distort the experience of the viewer. Overall, this results in subconscious acceptance of a simulation as the norm. An association between sexual pleasure and violence is formed.

The pleasure-violence association could first be established at a young age. According to a survey of students, 79% of adolescents had seen pornography involving violence by age 18, while a third had actively sought out material involving sexual violence (Weale). “Teenagers are learning more from pornography than sex education classes ... [but] Children do not have the context to understand that pornography isn’t real” (Wright). In youth, their first encounter with sensuality is molded into violence. As they grow, the correlation is only solidified through media.

At a developed age, the normalization of sexual violence could form even with preexisting associations countering it. A key factor in this is desensitization. Exposure to repeated sexual cues leads to “down regulation of reward systems... [and] the development of habituation to previous stimuli” (De Alarcón et al). Physical and psychological responses to the aggressive scenes are diminished, but the intent for pleasure remains. “This results in a dysfunctional enhanced preference for sexual novelty” (De Alarcón et al.) as viewers search for stimulation that can invigorate a reaction post-desensitization. Typically, in this search for new material, the intensity of the scenes also increases (Cormier). Thus, users of pornography can find themselves conditioned and led toward brutality— regardless of their intentions.

The intersection of oppression against women and pornography is especially notable. In intimate scenes, “perpetrators of aggression were usually male, whereas targets of aggression were overwhelmingly female. Targets most often showed pleasure or responded neutrally to the aggression” (Bridges et al). Users of pornography “learn to see women as sex objects, engaged in a transactional, one-way interaction. It can breed a lack of empathy towards the women” (Upton et al). Viewers are deflected from the significance of the violent act, and they instead justify it with provided reassurance that the woman welcomes the aggression (Whisnant 124). Through continual demonstrations, a positive response to aggression becomes an expectation as opposed to a possibility. This furthers the objectification of women as they are assigned a function. Subsequent impacts then manifest in society, contributing to the challenges that women face.

It is not inherently detrimental or immoral to participate in aggressive intimacy when the involved participants are willing, but the real harms emerge when problematic portrayals of consent are present alongside such themes. In an analysis of mainstream videos on Pornhub, researchers found that almost 40% of non-aggressive activities did not actively consider consent and non-consensual aggression appeared in about 12% of the videos

(Gilmore). This “reinforces the traditional sex script, which negotiates sexual consent through non-verbal cues or nothing at all” (Fegley 17). Definite consent is markedly important to promote. A negligence in doing so throughout pornographic media can undermine its perceived significance. Even minor instances create precedence which allows for larger infractions to be overlooked. Subconsciously, viewers may blur the boundaries of permission based on what they intake. When the line of consent becomes too vague, its shape could cease to exist.

Sometimes, consent is depicted, and the participants’ reactions are encouraging. Unfortunately, the conditions around this can still reinforce damaging behaviors. Many videos show “the male making sexual advances and the female providing token resistance before engaging in sexual activity” (Fegley 17). This creates a dangerous mindset that coercion and external pressures are a pathway to consent. In a world perpetuated by such situations, a refusal becomes a challenge made enticing by its very foundation of denial. Rape myths are reinforced and in turn intensify deleterious viewpoints.

Putting the Implications in Perspective

“Her strength was gone, she grew pale, overcome by the effort of her rapid flight.”

The normalization of sexual violence through pornography has material consequences. “Consumers use pornographic sexual scripts to navigate real-world sexual experiences and guide sexual expectations. The cognitive processing of these sexual scripts takes place without forethought, done primarily through habit ... Pornography is not simple fantasy; it is an easily accessible template” (Sun 985). Although produced with entertainment in mind, the structures enforced by pornography are applied concretely. The realm of this replication and the physical are interconnected.

In a survey of women who survived sexual assault, 12% reported that pornography was imitated during their experience of abuse (Bergen and Bogle). Additionally, a study on teen dating violence found that “boys exposed to violent pornography were 2–3 times more likely to report sexual [teen dating violence] perpetration ... while girls exposed to violent pornography were over 1.5 times more likely to perpetrate threatening TDV” (Rostad 1). Overall, “pornography use has been associated with an increased likelihood of committing both verbal and physical acts of sexual aggression ... Use of pornography has also been significantly associated with reduced willingness to intervene in a potential act of sexual violence” (Upton et al).

Pornography consumption is not synonymous with an act of sexual violence, nor would it necessarily cause a viewer to commit sexual violence without prior susceptibilities. However, the reverberations from these imperceptible factors manifest in society as sculpted attitudes and threatening inclinations. Ultimately, the mismanagement of

important concepts in pornography raises barriers in the effort to dismantle systemic issues of sexual assault.

A Diagnostic Approach

“Nymph, Wait! ... It is love driving me to follow you!”

—Apollo, to Daphne

While the potential detriments of pornography are evident, it would be an oversimplification to claim that pornography is entirely damaging. Pornography can benefit sexual wellness, mental health, relationships, sexual knowledge, and self-acceptance in sexual minority individuals (Rothman). The delicate influences of pornography consumption are difficult to identify exactly and could be both positive and negative. Much research around the topic is still correlative. While pornography consumption cannot always be isolated to a direct outcome, it can still heighten undesirable risk factors. Essentially, it is about the circumstances and characteristics of those affected. The primary concern should be specifically “in those who already are predisposed to hold sexist views or to behave in an aggressive fashion, [as] porn can exacerbate pre-existing and dangerous propensities” (Cormier).

When forming conclusions about pornography and its effects, it is critical to not antagonize the industry and its viewers on presumption. Doing so only worsens the polarization present in discussion and leads to the proliferation of propaganda. “A noticeable subset of researchers come at these issues with a focus... They try to establish ways to confirm that porn is causing whatever... they already believe” (Cormier). However, pornography cannot be pragmatically assigned to one side of the morality spectrum. It is therefore necessary to address this multifaceted subject with a receptive outlook to best comprehend the intricacies of the situation.

Countering the Repercussions

“Since you cannot be my bride, you must be my tree! ... So you also will wear the beauty of undying leaves.”

—Apollo, to Daphne

The consequences of pornography consumption can be mitigated given that it is addressed with a moderate methodology that initiates solvency. While banning pornography would remove the dangers brought by the media and its industry, this is not feasible with respect to reality. To some, it could be considered an infringement upon constitutional rights and cause adverse receptions. Instead, spreading awareness,

conveying beneficial themes, and enforcing stricter content control are alternative ways to deter the impacts brought by pornography use.

First, solvency starts in youths. The internet utilization of young children should be managed by their parents to ensure safety online. This is particularly crucial during a period where they do not have the necessary context to understand pornography if they encounter it. As they age into adolescents, supervision can be eased. This comes with the addition of comprehensive sexual education. Sexual education is necessary to establish the importance of consent, healthy intimacy, and understanding of how delineations in pornography may differ from processes in actuality. It is shown to decrease dating violence rates while increasing bystander intervention (“Access to Comprehensive Sex Education”). Unfortunately, many people still face barriers in obtaining this information. As such, organizations and education systems need to prioritize the establishment of these curriculums.

Additionally, pornography sites can be regulated to mitigate the potential for harm. “Pornhub has removed a majority of its content – millions of explicit videos – uploaded from unverified users as part of a series of changes following allegations that the site showed videos of child abuse and nonconsensual sexual behavior” (Valinsky). Other state laws regarding age verification have been proposed but have not yet passed (Miller). Awareness of pornography consumption and its effects prompt transformations to both the source of the material as well as the legislation pertaining to it. The reactionary presence of these reforms is a promising indication of change. However, sites and videos that normalize sexual violence are still abundant despite this occasion of content removal. It is therefore critical to continue analyzing the ramifications of pornography and respond as internet industries expand.

Concluding Sentiments

“Impudent boy, what are you doing with a man’s weapons?”

—Apollo, to Cupid

Before Daphne’s story began, Apollo had insulted the god of love and was thus shot by Cupid’s arrow. His lust was born of violence— a prophecy inked by Ovid’s hand. But the lives outside of this tale can be rewritten. As the scope of pornography use grows, the sexual aggression portrayed through it needs to be evaluated. Ultimately, both individuals and administrations can regulate pornography mediums to counter the consequences of sexual violence normalization.

Student Name: Aileen Nguyen
Grade: 11
School: I H Kempner High School
Title: The Outlier to a Standard
Category: Personal Essay & Memoir
Key: Silver Key
Educator: Susan henson

Starting at thirteen years old, my mother called me into her room to pluck out my hair that was turning gray and pick out my whiteheads. Although I felt the jolts of pain from having my hair pulled out and rough tweezers ripping out my clogged pores, I didn't think much of it at the time. In a twisted sense, I thought it was her own way of caring for me. If I didn't come to her room, I would do it myself over a bathroom sink, huddling over a mirror and concentrating on the imperfections of my textured skin and unruly hair

I watched myself heave and sob when I didn't look like the girls on social media. It's a terrible feeling, really. In my self-loathing, I felt like I wasn't in my own body; moreover, I had somehow slipped inside the body of a pig. It's often that I feel this way still as a teenage girl with access to the Internet and apps like Twitter and Instagram. One in three teen girls find that Instagram makes their body image issues worse, after all ("How Technology"). The models that pop up in my feed fuel the competitive side of me, a side that may do more harm than good.

This impossible standard I put myself toward, however, has sort of worn off as time has passed. The feeling of ecstasy I felt from being finally able to eat delicious, full meals and look in the mirror, feeling fine about the way I looked was greater than those cruel feelings I harbored toward myself.

Scrolling through my Instagram explore page, I see a lot of South Korean, Chinese, and Japanese women with curves that would be impossible to achieve without a little effort. I'm not really any of those ethnicities though—I'm Vietnamese. Throughout all my years, I have never seen someone idolize a Vietnamese celebrity, much less a woman. Vietnamese girls around my age tend to idolize the East Asian standards of beauty: pale skin, slim nose, hourglass-shaped bodies, and a tall frame. All of these features can't be acquired through sheer effort though, just plain old genetics. I wasn't gifted with any of these characteristics besides maybe pale skin that was already doomed from the scorching Texas sun.

I remember my friend holding up a photocard of a female South-Korean idol and instantly comparing myself to her. I thought to myself, "Why do I have so much cheek fat? How can I get clear skin like her? How do I get my bangs to be in the perfect place?" My thoughts swarmed me like I was trapped in a beehive, stinging me for all my worth. I could hear

my friend's voice saying, "I wish I could look like her... If only I wasn't so tan." I immediately shut her words down, complimenting her gleaming smile, her expressive brown eyes, her delicate hands, and her small wrists. But in the end, I found myself comparing myself to the idol, a seemingly perfect person, and my friend, who doesn't even appreciate her own beauty.

Watching girls like me fawn over those traits as a somewhat-tan, Vietnamese girl made me wonder if I could accept myself, look into the mirror, and feel proud of how I look that day. In some ways, I resent the system that Asian beauty standards have built themselves around; in other ways, I find myself admiring the standards unhealthily, desiring for them in myself. Redoing my hair for hours every morning, staying up late to apply my skincare routine, and starving myself, however, made my emotions swirl around like the ice cream I skipped the other night. I felt like anger controlled my entire being and I was a spectator, watching as I crumbled before myself.

I know that I'll never reach the standard naturally with a lifetime ahead of me, but I have used that to accept the fact that perhaps the standard of beauty others strive for shouldn't be a path I take on. Girls like me tend to be more vulnerable to the harmful impacts of social media because of society's emphasis on the physical appearance of girls and women (Jarman, et al). As a teenage girl in 2023, the world seems to revolve around me, and the embarrassing actions and thoughts I have can be seen across the universe. But, it doesn't mean I have to skip dessert or reapply my CeraVe cleanser for the third time in hopes of my pimples going away.

Instead, I'll walk forward, forward into a path of living like a girl who is just a teenager.

Student Name: William Lam
Grade: 11
School: I H Kempner High School
Title: The Paint Splotch
Category: Poetry
Key: Silver Key
Educator: Susan henson

The Paint Splotch

We take in the exhausted, unwanted personas,
and the shunned, forsaken by their terrorizing land.
The despondent masses with no places to roam,
Lady of Liberty provides a brand-new home,
a land jubilant with colors,
away from the monochrome.

As a union, we are made of paint:
all colors overlap on the blank color palette,
to paint the canvas of our United States, without restraint.
Our canvas painted by our mother of the banished,
like Picasso painting his magnum opus.
The "Guernica" bellows the sorrows of indifferences,
implying all races and orientations are authorized into a unified nation.

Now sign the vibrant contract,
allowing our mother's encompassing liberty,
to take in war-torn refugees.
Let us abandon the trickeries

of your flawed, jagged home

and the false chivalries.

Thus, come embrace the union of liberties.

Student Name: Henry Phan

Grade: 11

School: I H Kempner High School

Title: The Prescribed Burning and Extraction of California

Category: Critical Essay

Key: Silver Key

Educator: Susan henson

Introduction

At the end of 2018, the California Department of Forestry and Fire Protection reported the year's wildfire season had resulted in two million acres of land burned through by wildfires and over 24,000 structures and buildings destroyed as a result (CAL FIRE). The damages are also expensive, as the Western Fire Chief Association asserts the 2018 wildfire season had, in total, caused over \$22 billion dollars in damages alone (WFCA). In the face of these damages, many potential solutions have been proposed to reduce such damages. These proposed solutions range from dealing with environmental factors like firestick farming suggested by Julia Watson, Indigenous design architect, which can reduce the spread of forest fire (Watson). While other solutions address economic factors such as increased funding into wildfire programs like California's governor proposed \$1.2 billion into wildfires management programs (Kerstein). The introduction of these proposals begs the question: how can California reduce property damage from wildfires? When looking through a scientific and economic perspective, increased implementation of fuel treatments would decrease economic damage to private property through limiting the spread and thus damages of wildfires.

Causes of Wildfires

A majority of wildfires are started because of human intervention and are responsible for most damages. For instance, according to the National Interagency Fire Center (NIFC), a total of 7,750 fires were caused by humans in 2018, while only 305 fires were started naturally by lightning strikes in the same year. Similarly in 2019, NIFC reports 7,840 fires were started by human causes, while 554 fires ignited naturally by lightning strikes (NIFC "Human"; NIFC "Lighting"). When looking at historical trends of fire ignition, it is found the vast majority of fires are started from human intervention. The findings from NIFC further correlate with data from the US National Park Service (NPS), where almost 85% of all wildfires across the country were human caused. NPS explains these human-caused fires spread from failure in equipment, discarded cigarettes, burning of waste, unattended campfires, or arson (NPS). These fires contribute to most of the damage. One study from the University of Colorado Boulder found human started fires were the cause for 97% of

the homes in danger of suffering damage and accounted for a third of the total cost of fire suppression (Mietkiewicz, Nathan, et al). In other words, lowering the amount of wildfire would decrease property damage, but to meaningfully reduce the numbers of fires, a way to discourage people from indirectly or intentionally starting fires.

The Root of a Growing Problem

The severity of wildfire is increasing because of excess fire suppression. Fire suppression is an important practice, extinguishing fire preserves the local vegetation. Tom Stohlgren, a researcher at the Fort Collins Science Center, explains vegetation serves as an important keystone species of the ecosystem by securing soil in the ground and preventing mudslide or dust storms, providing habitats and food for local animal populations, and storing carbon dioxide emission (Stohlgren, and Holcombe). Of course, not only does fire suppression preserve local wildlife, but it saves human lives and reduces economic damage. Nevertheless, it should also be considered the ecological purpose and benefits wildfire does have. For while humans do not benefit from wildfire, it serves an important function in nature. Environmentally, wildfires perform important roles in the ecosystems, as researchers in the USDA Rocky Mountains Station correlate their findings with those of Tom Stohlgren. Furthermore, researchers explain wildfires in nature serve to kill invasive species, build up fire resistance of local vegetation, and enrich soil (Bond and Keane; Stohlgren, and Holcombe). Moreover, while fire suppression reduces damage and preserves vegetation, it leaves behind excess dead biomass or detritus, leaving a huge amount of fuel for wildfires starting or coming in the area for the future. To summarize, while fire suppression preserves the environment, it also allows for dead biomass and detritus to be preserved and further build up, thus increasing the size and thus severity of wildfires starting or moving through the region by giving it a plentiful source of fuel.

Effectiveness of Fuel Treatments

The implementation of fuel treatment has a positive effect toward limiting wildfires. Bob Rummer, engineer at the USDA Forest Service, defines fuel treatment as the removal or reduction of excess biomass from fuel wildfires, usually through prescribed and controlled man-made fires, but also manual extraction and other method to remove fuel sources (Rummer). These methods have reduced fire risks, as researchers of the US Forest Service further explain continuous application of fuel treatment through prescribed burns had increased forest resiliency to fire and reduced ignition of wildfires in affected areas (Loudermilk, Louise, et al). Although starting fires seems counterintuitive to active fire suppression, fuel treatment itself acts as a preventative measure, with the intended goal of preventing fuel igniting and limiting the spread of fire by starving them of fuel. While fire prevention does not directly act as suppression, it can still support firefighting efforts with its effects. For example, researchers at the Southern Research Station

studying wildfire risk at Lake Tahoe Basin found areas exposed to continuous applications of fuel

treatment had demonstrated up to a 55% longer duration to burn through the fuel-deprived areas compared to non-treated environments of the same area (Loudermilk, Louise, et al). The longer durations needed for fire to burn through areas would give crucial time to firefighters, time needed to set up fire lines, move personnel and equipment, alongside evacuating civilians. However, to see the effect of fuel management, implementation of fuel treatment must be carefully planned. For instance, one study led by the Conservation Biology Institute found nearly 40% of studied fuel treated areas never met fire. Additionally, the study further discovered fires only stopped at fuel treated areas 46% of the time, usually with assistance of fire suppression by firefighters (Syphard, Alexandra D., et al). Fuel treatment slows the progress of wildfire but does not stop the fire itself. As such, fuel treated zones would need to be accessible to firefighters to be effective in helping stop fires. In short, the application of fuel treatment is effective in reducing the spread of wildfires through limiting fuel and creating a form of fire break in the process but does not actively stop fire without the presence of active fire suppression efforts.

Economic Feasibility

Looking from an economic standpoint, the increased implementation of fuel treatment would reduce the overall fire suppression cost by limiting the size of wildfires. One research study performed by the USDA Forest Service reported continuously fuel treated areas had a 31% decrease in mean annual area burned (Loudermilk, Louise, et al). Moreover, researcher Jose J. Sanchez from the Pacific Southwest Research Station further explains smaller fire size can potentially reduce fire suppression cost and property damage, finding prescribed burning correlated with a reduced fire suppression cost and reduced property damages (Sanchez, Jose J, et al). In any case, by limiting the sizes of wildfire, fuel treatment would therefore decrease the cost of suppressing fire by reducing the amount of resources used compared to the higher potential resources spent on a much larger fire.

However, although fuel treatment demonstrates effectiveness in reducing property damage, many land managers argue the administering of fuel treatments would have too high of a cost. Industrial Engineer Matthew P. Thompson notes fuel treatment has a high cost, coming with a high initial application cost and requiring continuous maintenance cost (Thompson, and Anderson). It is important to consider fuel treatment does not have to involve prescribed burning. Though fuel treatment in the form of prescribed burning can have high operating costs, these expenses can also be compensated in the process of fuel treatment through manual collection and processing. One such way is through collection and processing of fuel rather than disposal through prescribed burn. In this

method, land managers would harvest and process biomass such as wood to sell commercially to re-compensate the initial application cost and cost of continuous maintenance over time to maintain a fuel treated zone. Moreover, feasibility of fuel management profitability has been already explored, as one study from the USDA Forest Service's Rocky Mountain Research Station estimate the addition of fuel treatment through harvest and processing of fuel within forested regions of California could range a net profit of around the ranges of \$1,510 per hectare in ideal conditions and without overhead costs. The study further asserts that such cost and profit margin were similar to rates of the logging industry (Rummer). While the research only addresses the economic feasibility of fuel treatment of forested areas, it nevertheless would affect a significant area of California. To put in perspective, the US Department of Agriculture reports California's forests make up around 33 million acres or around a third of the area within California (USDA). Taking into consideration the large forestry of California, while not all cases of fuel management would always achieve profitability, a significant portion of forest land can economically re-compensate their initial execution cost and potentially self-provide upkeep and maintenance cost. In other

words, while the cost of initial fuel treatment would be high, the potential profitability or economic self-sustainability of forested areas would cover the cost of implementation and maintenance for continuous fuel treatment. In conclusion, the widespread application of fuel treatment has a high potential of economic feasibility, as a significant area of California's forested has potential to attain profitability in implementing fuel treatment zones. Furthermore, cases of profitability can also increase the chance of potential government subsidization because of lower cost needed to subsidize.

Defensible Space

Historically, fire breaks involving fuel management have already been widely implemented. For example, the 2019 California Fire Code requires buildings and structures within fire-risked fire hazards to maintain defensible space around the perimeter of the building. The requirement for defensible space is further explained in CA Govt Code § 51182, which specify property owners within high fire hazard areas must maintain a defensible zone of space 100 feet around the structure, fulfilled by clearing non-ember-resistant vegetation and removal and minimizing of potential fuel (CBSC; OLC). While effective in reducing property damage, it does not address the root problem of fire spreading enough to reach the property. Overall, a focus on fuel treatment in forested areas rather than around properties would have a greater impact on reducing property damages by limiting the severity and size of fire rather than reducing the spread of an already active fire.

Current State of Prescribing Burning

Currently, prescribed burning is underutilized, making it less effective than it can be. In fact, one research study from the Stanford Institute for Economic Policy Research (SIEPR) found air quality regulations had made the deployment of prescribed burn difficult, as smoke emissions from controlled burns were restricted by environmental regulation regarding air quality and required stringent permitting. SIEPR further explains the restriction and requirement of extensive permitting made the implementation of controlled burns difficult and decreased their intervals, which inadvertently increased fire risk (Burke, Marshall, et al). In short, the utilization of fuel treatment by prescribed burning is limited and difficult because of regulatory obstacles. In addition, SIEPR further points out the cost of prescribed burning ranges from \$100 up to \$1,000 per acre of treated forests, with an estimated area up to 30 million acres of forest in California, able to see positive effects through prescribed burning (Burke Marshall, et al). The cost of fuel treatment through prescribed burning is extensive; however, it is made even more burdensome as the cost is shouldered alone by the government. The current utilization of fuel treatment does not utilize the potential of economic incentives to promote involvement of private sectors to reduce overall cost of prescribing burns and promoting efforts to prescribe and thus increasing coverage of fuel treated area across the state. To conclude, the current implementation of widespread fuel treatment through prescribed burning is underutilized because of uncooperative regulations limiting their effect and exclusion of private sectors in treatment efforts.

Recommendation

To meaningfully reduce property damage by reducing fires, California needs to feasibly address two parts of the problem: the increasing severity of wildfire and the cause of wildfire from human-caused events. Therefore, to reduce severity of future wildfire, it is recommended California should implement a program administering widespread fuel treatment zones across historically high fire-risk areas. In addition, such programs should provide economic incentives for the private sector to administer fuel treatment, prescribed burn, or manual extraction, in high-risk areas for maximum efforts and coverage. In addition, such a program should implement routine clearing of public vegetated areas commonly interacted with by people.

Student Name: Faith Sojobi
Grade: 12
School: George Bush High School
Title: The Starry Night and The Great Wave
Category: Poetry
Key: Silver Key
Educator:

Celeste colored swirls take me on a magic carpet ride throughout the city.

In the dark blue midnight mist,
the moonlight is so close i can taste it
and all of the sea salt.

It sprinkles down like angel dust,
addictive and charming.
Standing at the peak,
I'm so high up, the prophecies say I have to crash
down like a great wave,
all blue and sweaty
You'd think you were bigger than a mountain,
but you are merely a bright yellow dot.

Student Name: Noey Do
Grade: 11
School: I H Kempner High School
Title: The Story of My Life: How Others Shaped Me
Category: Personal Essay & Memoir
Key: Silver Key
Educator: Susan henson

Identity is not a single thing that can be pointed at directly; it's something that one has to really dive

into a person's memories and thoughts in order to get a direct answer. For me, that's probably like that too. While our lives are shaped by many factors like parties, hangouts, losses, and grief, those aren't just the biggest factors that shape one's identity. Dr. Jackson said, "Remember to always be represent the land of sunshine and greatness," a quote that I hear almost every day that probably floats around unconsciously wrapped around my brain. At first hearing it, I thought "She means to just be happy," and I giggled and laughed with my friends without a doubt. But what struck me is that the longer I stayed here at Kempner enjoying my time, I slowly redefined her definition of the land of "sunshine and happiness." My identity is not merely shaped my just events that just so to "happen" in life, but rather, it's the people you surround yourself with. It's being around friends who you can look up to everyday, talk to everyday, and smile to everyday. For me, my identity was not entirely shaped by miracles; it was by the people I chose to be around each day.

Around the age of six to seven, my parents and I were living in the rolling hills of Evansville, Indiana, a state with friendly neighbors and close-knit communities. I lived in the state where I could always call "home" even when I feel like it no longer connects to me anymore. I was coming home from school when parents broke the news that "we"

were moving to Vietnam, a country they considered home, but I didn't. I never liked the idea of moving to a completely new country, especially since I knew moving to a "motherland country" without knowing my own native language would've been the biggest setback. It was detrimental to me by the fact that moving to a new place without knowing anybody would leave with no friends, and ultimately, a horrible time here in Vietnam.

As I continued my journey through the lush green countryside of Vietnam, I slowly started to pick up the melodic language and rich culture. One sunny afternoon, my father glanced at me sideways and asked in his gruff voice, "Why don't you go out there and make some friends?" I hesitated, chewing my lip in doubt. Most of the local kids didn't speak much English, and those who did often teased me for my accent and tattered clothes that set me apart.

However, I decided to be brave.

Taking a deep breath, I pushed open the creaky metal gate in front of our little house and wandered toward a group of kids laughing and yelling as they played volleyball. "Chào các bạn, tôi có thể chơi cùng không?" I called out nervously. To my surprise, they welcomed me in with bright smiles. We played joyfully in the rainy, muddy field, not caring as fat raindrops pelted our bare feet and legs. I asked their names - Phuong, Linh, Minh - and slowly made new friends.

As we lounged in the shade after the game, sharing mandarins and sticky rice treats, I realized Vietnam wasn't so bad after all. My new friends taught me handy phrases like "đừng có giỡn" (don't joke around) and "buồn chết được" (bored to death). They introduced me to their favorite singers, the latest slang, and the coolest motorbike tricks. With their help, I was starting to feel at home, hoping that these were the people I needed all along in order to make my life better.

Those long summer days spent playing đá cầu, watching TV, and learning traditional skills like washing clothes in the river from my new Vietnamese friends shaped me significantly. Under their guidance, I absorbed the rhythms and values of their lives - the importance of community, hospitality, and harmony with nature. Sitting crossed-legged on woven mats in their homes at night, welcomed as one of their own with heaped plates of delicious foods, their kindness and generosity left a deep impression on my heart. Being immersed in their world broadened my perspective - I came to see the world through their eyes and found beauty in unexpected places. Through those friendships, Vietnam was now a part of my identity. My horizons were expanded, and I gained a deeper appreciation for a culture I once saw as foreign.

After three unforgettable years, it was time to say our tearful last farewells. As I hugged my Vietnamese friends tight, I realized many of these relationships were unexpected gifts. We had forged bonds deeper than I could have imagined, sharing lazy summer afternoons playing fun games and learning the rhythms of each other's lives. Though it broke my heart to leave, I carried the memories of their kindness, generosity, and perspective with me.

I came to the sprawling cowboy state of Texas, a place unknown and foreign, to immerse myself in English. Stepping off the plane into the sweltering Houston heat was a shock after Vietnam's lush green landscapes. The scalding concrete jungle of this massive Texas metropolis was a world away from my little village. Gone were the melodic calls to prayer and fragrant smells of phở that had become familiar.

When I first entered the chaotic fifth grade classroom mid-year, my "broken" English marked me as an outsider. I sat at my desk, glancing curiously at the chattering students who

eyed me in return. As the year progressed, I remained isolated - adrift while friendships bloomed around me. I spent many recesses wandering the blacktop alone, stung by overhearing laughter I imagined was aimed at me. Group projects were awkward, partners merely tolerating the new foreign kid. I struggled to contribute to conversations, hesitant to reveal my shaky grammar and accent. My broken English became a barrier, preventing me from connecting.

After school, the tennis court became my refuge. There, language didn't matter to me - only focus and determination. The satisfying thwack of racket meeting ball drowned out my worries. Gliding across the red hard court to make a winning shot, I felt the joyful rush of accomplishment. My father's shouts of encouragement buoyed my spirits. Though tennis didn't erase my loneliness, it gave me confidence and purpose while I navigated a new culture.

My early isolation could have set the tone for a difficult transition, leaving me withdrawn and resentful. Instead, I channeled those feelings into dedication - immersing myself in English, determined to bridge the loneliness and divide. My identity was shaped not by rejection, but resilience. I emerged stronger, armed with hard-won courage and empathy for all newcomers who feel out of place. Though friendships took time, in the end my own perseverance was the life raft that carried me through.

Fast forward to the present day, I am now a tennis player and hardworking student here in the land of sunshine and greatness. With many friends who share laughs with me and teachers who are willing to help me succeed, my identity was shaped significantly by my past and present experiences. I represent not just myself, but the millions of others whose identities have been shaped by a confluence of factors. I am grateful for those who helped guide me through challenging times and nurture my growth.

My identity will continue evolving but remains rooted in resilience and a willingness to learn. I look forward to discovering more about myself and the world. But no matter where life leads, I will carry my unique experiences that shaped me. At my core, I represent what it means to stay open, stay curious, and above all - stay you.

Student Name: Sherry Huang
Grade: 11
School: Dulles High School
Title: To Be a Bird
Category: Personal Essay & Memoir
Key: Silver Key
Educator:

When I was younger, I liked to watch birds with my friends. We made fun of the ugly ones, gray and brown pigeons that hopped narrow-mindedly from foot to foot, and laughed as we scared them off, running and yelling. But unlike those bound to the ground, the ugly pigeons could take to the skies, soaring until they could no longer hear our taunts, basking in the bliss of ignorance, free.

My first memory of myself was when my family moved from China to the United States. Even at four years old, I knew I felt alienated; I could traverse the new plains, from Kroger to twenty-lane freeways, but I would only disappoint myself in the smallness of not belonging.

A few months after moving to America, my pre-kindergarten teacher gave my class a drawing prompt. It was written in large, neat letters on a poster in front of the group of fidgeting toddlers I was situated with, as if I could be anything akin to these booger-eating, drooling little kids who couldn't even count to a hundred. Yet it was I who sat there dumbly as the others around me worked in their notebooks, busily scribbling whatever their soaring imaginations had conjured in response to the prompt. It was I who, rather than following the prompt, instead meticulously copied down the words just as neatly as the teacher wrote them, hoping that if I did a good enough job, the teacher wouldn't mind if I couldn't understand what the prompt was asking me to do. It was I who was tentative as I followed the stumbling children up to the teacher's desk to show her my work.

She looked at my paper, furrowed her brows, and asked me something. I stared at her blankly, feeling downright stupid, because of course I had no idea what she had just said.

Smiling exasperatedly, she started drawing on my paper, and sheepishly, I connected the simple curves to be lackluster images of birds. I hurriedly drew a double-curve bird of my own. My teacher looked up and handed back my notebook—her countenance this time was one of relief—and I trudged back to my seat to finish my drawing.

At that moment, as I sat back down at a table with children who ignored me because I had no choice but to ignore them, I wanted to be one of the birds in my notebook: simple, free, belonging somewhere. And even when I returned to the teacher with a satisfactory page full of birds and she drew a sky-blue checkmark in the corner of my paper, I wanted

to travel to the limitlessness of the sky and never return to this place where I didn't understand anyone and no one understood me.

I read in kindergarten that the national bird of the United States was the bald eagle. In fact, it was one of the first books I picked up, vibrant with the red, white, and blue flag on the cover. I was confused as to why the eagle, sharp and witty, would be degraded under an unfitting adjective like "bald." After all, it was clearly revered in American culture, placed strategically next to the flag. Soon enough, though, I paid it no further mind. A name meant nothing more than just a name to a five-year-old.

The feeling of not understanding dissipated as I grew fluent in English. I could communicate well with my peers, and to me, that was a source of freedom in of itself. I was no longer bound to what I could express through frustrated yelling or crying. Instead, I poured every morsel of my soul into the language that had brought me so much dismay and yet, now, so much joy. I spent my waking hours planning and drafting stories and poems and studying new vocabulary simply because it was enjoyable. When people praised my work, I felt like an eagle: proud and iconic. American.

I started reading chapter books in second grade. The thicker the book and the smaller the font, the more accomplished I felt. To me, reading was a miracle—the rare, gorgeous gift the Western gods had bestowed upon me. And the more I indulged in this gift, the more I consumed each word like I was starved. I read everything, everywhere: the nutrition facts on a cereal box, the instruction manuals of unbuilt furniture. I read like a living man who wished to live more, or perhaps a dead man cruelly murdered at his own hand who wished to be revived.

But the more I assimilated into Western culture, the more uneasy I felt. That muffled nausea hacked away at my hard-earned aerodynamics until I stumbled against the ground, every flap of my wings heavier than the one before. To peel away my Asian skin and don wings of red, white, and blue was easier said than done. My foreign food and clothes and face turned from a deeply integrated aspect of myself into something I made a point to reject. I bought revolting school meals instead of bringing my mother's homemade cooking. I laughed along with my classmates' teasing about the shape of my eyes, agreeing that they were indeed hilarious.

My teachers advise that the only thing you can control in your life is yourself, as if I could save myself from oppression. Sure, all this loneliness may look internal to you, Mrs. Jones, but you don't know every time I mumbled the Pledge of Allegiance because I didn't know the words. I wasn't born knowing it. I wasn't born American. I'm sorry.

My family visited China the summer I turned eleven. In the lobby of our hotel, I was fidgeting in an armchair, and my mother was at the front desk; I didn't know what she was doing, and I wasn't old enough to care. There was a group of white tourists swarming the space next to me like familiar oxygen. One of them, a college-aged girl with wavy blonde hair, said "Hi" to me with a classic American grin. Just before I could return the greeting,

her companion—Chinese—told her that “She can’t understand English.” “Oh,” the blonde girl said, turning away from me. I only had the guts to stare at her back, then, and silently bear the weight of her “Oh” on my heart. Now, though, I think I would scream. Force them to acknowledge that I can speak English, I can speak English. Maybe then they would look at me, at the American clothes I was wearing, at this American face that just so happened to be born Chinese.

I am American, born Chinese. I suppose this is one of the reasons I love English punctuation: because just two very small tweaks later is American-born Chinese, a phrase all my Chinese-American friends loudly proclaimed as children. But they are not confused; they are simply Chinese people born in America, while I have gruesomely stripped away my Chinese roots and plastered on American layers. Still, we are birds of a feather—whether American, born Chinese, or American-born Chinese, the result is still ABC, as easy and intuitive as the English alphabet. We flock together. I’m American, we told the world. Don’t look at my face. I’m American; I’m sure of it.

I say all this, yet I still don’t know what being American is. Is it the exaggeration of each syllable as people speak to me, even when I had thrown myself into English and away to be fluent? The “What. Would. You. Like. To. Or. Der.”? And I think, I hope, that if this is true, I would want no part of this place, this culture that alienates children like me with more melanin than they’re used to.

Eventually, I changed my name. Every year before the summer I did, on the first day of school, when the teacher paused during roll call and squinted at his paper before belching out a horrible “Yeh-MANG,” I would know to raise my hand and reply, “I go by Sherry.” Even when I had a Chinese teacher, perfectly capable of correctly pronouncing “Yimeng,” I would insist on being called by my English name. After all, my classmates would always make fun of “Yimeng.” It was such an exotic name and something they couldn’t understand. It was embarrassing. So, I changed it, although when the judge in court asked me for the reason for change, I couldn’t quite give a concise answer. Because I understood then the weight of the name, that the title one would announce as his identity should not be wasted on impulse. I look at “Sherry” with a little bit of melancholy now.

My peers still make fun of this name. They lightheartedly tease “Sherry” by rhyming it with “berry” and “cherry” and “marry” and so on. Often, it seems like nothing has changed—and yet it has, because “Yimeng” has been wholly destroyed and regenerated as “Sherry.” It should mean something that my face, my name, my culture can no longer represent my identity. Rather, identity is the unknown, the inexplicable, the incomprehensible. It is *tabula rasa*, to be written upon and erased and rewritten; it is the dynamic self and all its intricacies.

And if this identity belongs to America, the land of freedom, bald eagles, and all things good, then so be it. But if this same America taunts me, me who is bound to the ground and unable to fly even with the wings of red-white-blue that this country has so

graciously given me, then so be it. After all, destruction is the prerequisite for regeneration, and what is destruction if not this bruised, patchwork culture of mine? What is regeneration if not hard-earned tolerance?

The little sagacity that is bottled in these experiences has taught me much. Identity is opaque the same way my teachers were impatient, my peers were ignorant, and the Chinese tour companion was judgmental. But, then again, taunts thrown carelessly from rambunctious children failed to sway even ugly pigeons, and if they could still take to the skies, then I, beautiful in my identity, too can fly.

Student Name: Nguyen Pham
Grade: 11
School: I H Kempner High School
Title: Unmatched
Category: Poetry
Key: Silver Key
Educator: Scheffie Lindquist

A longing for freedom after war
a longing for peace after roar
my refuge reeking of abhor
the Newer Colossus, I am met:
She lifted her flame
and said to me, without fret
"Give me your tired, your poor,"
and your pain will reset

But my glass cracked her mosaic,
serrated and keen
exotic to speech, culture and cuisine
Reminiscing shared meals
'neath the smoke-filled sky
the aroma of the canh bí
as the soldiers trudged by

Wistfulness
weighed down my capacity
Disintegrated
my carcass of dull hopes and dreams

Pain only resumes
in the Land of Opportunity;
unmatched
to the comfort of Vietnam's debris

Student Name: Rosie Hong
Grade: 11
School: Clements High School
Title: untitled
Category: Humor
Key: Silver Key
Educator: Glenys McMennamy

because that's all i wanted to be.
a girl left nameless—rendered whole

& baptized in all things holy.
please. this is a eulogy for girls

born untitled. we can be more than the syllables
clenched between yellowing teeth.

in one dream, my mother curls her hollow body
beside me, unfurls my palms

under the lamp light.
i have a mìmì. a secret, she says.

she mouths her name like a confession
of sin, throat parched & hungered for

all the things left untold. i want to find her.
this name. please. she tucks a prayer

in her pocket, crinkles a twenty-dollar bill
under my pillow before she is whisked away by night.

& this is how i remember
my mother: a girl binded

by the identity of her name, body thinning until
she is nothing more than a ghost.

in another dream, sunlight splits the room
& my mother is nameless

but here. a sparrow with her plumage
spreading, salt-slicked from sea. there is no

warmth in this dream, just migration.
wherever i go, strangers still name me

like a coin rusted in dirt or
a fledgling without a mother to call

home. somehow, i see my mother in the movement
of their lips. how her body whittles

to the receding shoreline with every response.
i follow—face my palms to the sky, plaster

a tight-lipped smile. say,

please. leave everything untitled.

Student Name: Advika Asthana
Grade: 8
School: Quail Valley Middle School
Title: Why We Write
Category: Poetry
Key: Silver Key
Educator:

Why do we write?

We write to transport people to a place

Into a place of only fantasies

Plump soft roses and large vines

Sparkling skies and peaceful plains

We write to comfort

Words extending into a big hug

Drawing near the crackling fireplace

A cup of hot chocolate in hand topped

With marshmallows

We write to escape

On a carpet or birds flying over

Glistening mountaintops into a sunset-lit sky

Or safe under a looking umbrella on

The rainiest of days

We write to ignite sparks of hope

Burning on through the words

And to see what might happen if we together

Blow that spark into a flame

Student Name: Madison Farley
Grade: 10
School: North Shore Senior High School
Title: COVID-19: From a 12 year old's perspective
Category: Personal Essay & Memoir
Key: Silver Key
Educator: Manuel Marasigan

The 2020 CoronaVirus Pandemic was something that no one could have ever predicted. It had a major impact on so many lives across the world with most effects being negative but some positive.

In this memoir, I will be sharing how it was to be a twelve-year-old girl during a time of nothing but fear, grief, and uncertainty.

In March of 2020, I was in the sixth grade on my last day of school before a long-awaited spring break. Little did I know, however, this would be the last day of school for a very long time. I remember this like it was yesterday. It was a Friday and during the last class of the day everyone was discussing their spring break plans. As the room buzzed with anticipation and excitement my science teacher at the time asked the class if anyone had heard about the new virus from China that was rapidly spreading to which many said no. Afterward, the teacher proceeded to explain the situation to her students and warned them that this could be extremely dangerous and that we should be careful. I looked around and saw many worried faces but in the face of ignorance, I chose to brush off her words as some kind of way to frighten us.

As days passed I began to realize that my teacher was right. Businesses and schools began shutting down and not long after that my school was shut down too. At first it was only for two weeks but then two weeks turned into a month, then one month turned into the rest of the school year. I remember being ecstatic about the long break and the cancellation of state testing. In my mind this covid thing was actually doing some good in my life but in reality it was the beginning of one of the worst times we as a country have ever seen. As spring turned into summer the boredom quickly began setting in and all I could do was watch the daily news updates of our current situation. I noticed that the death rate came up a significant amount every day which made me sad but what ultimately opened my eyes to the reality of this disease was hearing about children my age who were completely healthy getting their lives quickly taken away from them all due to COVID. This caused me to snap out of my previous childish mindset and into a more

careful and diligent one. I continued to stay on top of social safety precautions along with cleanliness for the next year in hopes of keeping my family and I safe. A year later things started finally looking up; infection numbers were dropping, I began going out more, and I even received the covid vaccine. I finally felt like this nightmare had been coming to an end until the unthinkable happened.

One morning in July my mother called me downstairs into her room and had me sit next to her on the bed. In my head I was thinking that she was going to show me a comedic Facebook video or Tiktok but the look on her face was enough to tell me that something was wrong. I asked her if everything was okay and she regretfully explained that my counselor from elementary school had caught covid and had passed away the night before. The entire world stopped as her words rang like a bell throughout my entire body. How could someone so kind, so caring, and loving get this disease? Why? What could someone who spreads nothing but positivity have done to deserve a fate like that? Over the next few days I worried about her husband and children who I had become friends with over the years. This made me truly understand that anyone can get this disease and die from it. This was a harsh reminder to me that every day is not guaranteed and that we must be grateful for the time we do have because it could be taken away from anyone at any time.

I encourage everyone to love each other and be kind. The impact you have on others completely depends on you. You have the choice to treat people with the utmost respect and dignity. Each person you meet in your life is the one who tells your story after you're gone. In life, we decide not how our story ends but how it is told and interpreted by others. I challenge you to go out and be the best person you can be to those around you. You never know when your time will come and who will keep your name alive.

Student Name: Estrella Porfirio
Grade: 8
School: Woodland Acres Middle School
Title: Locked Up
Category: Science Fiction & Fantasy
Key: Silver Key
Educator: Louis Skipper

I wouldn't work my brain to my fullest potential. I wouldn't do my work in school which would make me have unpleasant grades on my report card, my family would ask me "If you are so intelligent why do you get such horrible grades in school?" I would just shrug and walk away.

I know I am intelligent. I just don't like how the school system works. It teaches you about things that you might not use once you are a grown adult. I believe they should teach about how to do taxes and how to save money to buy a house or maybe about how to get your credit up. But they don't, so I can't do anything about it.

One day while I was skipping my third-period class I started to notice that the hallways and classrooms didn't make sense how they were built. Then I started seeing the portraits on the wall that had small gaps that had a big enough gap so I could see what was inside. I peeked inside and saw a staircase. I started to try to open it until I found a button and the portraits became a door. I went in and you felt a very heavy presence so I started to walk up to try to explore. I reached the top of the school and it looked like a very old abandoned house but it had what looked like torture devices I got very uneasy so I decided to leave the top of the building.

That was two days ago and I really wanna go up to the building again. I just wanna see more in-depth. During lunch, I went to the secret passage and while I was going up I heard something tumble down. I jumped, I was frightened but I was very curious. I went down to check what it was. To my surprise, I saw a kid. I got startled and I squealed. The kid seemed a bit older than me and he was male I asked him what he was doing down here and he said 'I came here to hang out'. I told him I had never seen him around in school "I don't really come to school that is why" he told me. I felt quite uneasy and I told him that I saw him around. I needed to get to class before the bell rang.

I went along with the rest of the day feeling unsettled after I encountered the boy in the secret room. I still couldn't shake the feeling of something bad with that kid. Eventually, the day came to an end and my mother picked me up. I told her about the secret room and about the boy that was giving me a really bad vibe. She told me "he probably was trying to get to know you huney". But he wasn't giving me that type of vibe he was giving a vibe of bad luck.

The next day when I entered school I saw the boy he waved at me and told me to go toward him. I did and he told me his name was Alex. I introduced myself to be polite. He proceeded to talk to me about who he was and what his hobbies were. I politely excused myself to go to the restroom. Once I got out of the restroom I saw Alex standing right outside waiting for me to get out. I honestly felt really bad for judging him in our first encounter so I decided to give him a chance.

Alex: Hey is everything okay?

Zulema: Yeah, I just felt a little sick; thank you for asking

Zulema: Would you like to sit with me at lunch?

Alex: Can we instead go to the secret place?

Zulema: sure it's okay

After that, he dropped me off at my class. As soon as I entered the room one of the girls that sat next to me asked me who I had been talking to. I told her it was a kid I had met in school and that she might even know him. She told me that kids were saying I was going mad because I was talking to myself. That made me feel so dumb I knew that I wasn't going mad. I knew who I was talking to, it was a real living person I knew he was. Right?

I didn't want to go to lunch during my classes. I felt nervous to go to lunch. I again felt uneasy. But I was determined to find out what Alex actually was. And I don't know what

else he can be: human, vampire, ghost, demon, or what else doesn't make sense to me. But nonetheless, I was going no matter the outcome of it.

It was finally lunchtime and I had to go to the secret room to confront Alex about why people couldn't see him. Once everyone had gone to lunch I decided it was clear to go into the secret room. I didn't see him so I decided to go all the way to the top to explore the building more before Alex came. I reached the top and I found Alex sitting next to a bunch of big boxes. I asked him what they were and he told me it was him. I ask him what he means by that.

Alex: it's me

Zulema: What do you mean it's you? You're scaring me, what do you mean?

Alex: The reason I talked to you and that people can't see like you can is because I'm dead and I need you to let me be free.

Zulema: What do you mean I need to let you go free?!

Alex: I need you to tell people I'm here in a box. Please!

Alex: I'm not the only one stuck here, please set us free.

I run out and start screaming like a maniac HAVE I GONE MAD!!!! People start running out of the cafeteria asking me what's wrong but I'm in shock and I don't say anything. The student and teacher notice the secret passage and I just hear screams.....

Student Name: Carolina Vargas
Grade: 12
School: Galena Park High School
Title: My Eras
Category: Personal Essay & Memoir
Key: Silver Key
Educator: Kendra Walker

Freshman Era: "15" by Taylor Swift

I've found time can heal most anything
And you just might find who you're supposed to be

High school is a time to find yourself and experience freedom. My expectation of high school was crushed by the growing cases of COVID-19 and my IBD diagnosis. Due to the nonstop doctor's appointments, I was now falling behind in my classes. This caused my meticulous high school plan to change and I felt my world fall apart. My symptoms of IBD caused me to quit the activity of high school I was most looking forward to, Band. On top of all this, I had no help from my friends and teachers who were depicted over a screen as ones and zeros. I felt lost and alone.

I didn't know who I was supposed to be
At 15

Sophomore Era: "Shake It Off" by Taylor Swift

But I keep cruising
Can't stop, won't stop moving

After going into remission from my illness, I still felt something missing. When I rejoined the marching band and explored the clubs my school offered, is when I found a sense of belonging. Through my Robotics team and Band program, I would spend time after school

with like-minded individuals who not only had the same goal but cared for me as a person. Spending countless hours at robotic competitions allowed me to develop a strong connection with my team members, which increased my collaborative skills and strengthened my curiosity about the world around me. By our last robotics competition of the season, I was able to spearhead matches and bring new advancements to our robot through the use of pneumatics. This newfound growth in myself would help my team the following year to compete in the VEX Robotics World Championship.

It's like I got this music in my mind

Saying it's gonna be alright

Junior Era: "I Did Something Bad" by Taylor Swift

But why's it feel so good?

Most fun I ever had

Being the only girl on my Robotics team made me seek out opportunities for diversity in the STEM field. In the summer of junior year, I participated in a computer science program, Girls Who Code. This organization brought high school females worldwide to teach them the basics of programming. Here I delved into website design, debugging, and how important it is to collaborate with others. I decided to partner with one of my classmates on the final website because of our shared advocacy of disability accommodations. We created a website on the importance of disability accommodations as she suffered from hearing loss. Working with someone from such a different background allowed me to realize how important it is to collaborate with others to spark new ideas. The experience at GWC solidified my career choice of computer science engineering. The diverse set of girls sparked a desire in me to seek diversity in my future endeavors.

And I'd do it over and over and over again if I could

Senior Era: "The Man" by Taylor Swift

They'd say I hustled

Put in the work

After developing these past 3 years I have created bonds with classmates I see now as family. My Band section encouraged me to run for Homecoming Queen and with the campaigning of the entire band, NHS members, and the robotics team I won. These past few months have been a chance to show others who I am and how I represent myself. My senior class has seen me grow into a leader trusting me to be their class officer and NHS president. Although going into high school, my meticulous plan was ripped into shreds, I have been able to create something better than I could imagine. Every experience and hardship has prepared me to walk into my Aggies Era.

They wouldn't shake their heads and question how much of this I deserve

Student Name: Melanie Saucedo
Grade: 8
School: Woodland Acres Middle School
Title: My father loved to live
Category: Poetry
Key: Silver Key
Educator: Louis Skipper

My father loved to live

My father loved to draw

He loved to paint

But whenever he'd paint me

I would always complain

My father loved to listen to music

He loved to dance

But whenever he would call me over

I wouldn't take a chance

My father loved to sleep

He loved dreaming about my mother

But whenever he had nightmares

He would always smother

My father loved to cook

He loved to flip pancakes every Tuesday morning

But whenever he burns them

He still gives it to me without warning

My father loved to watch TV
He loved to watch comedy shows
But whenever the power goes out
His anger grows

My father loved to live
He loved to love
But when he got into the car one morning
He became an angel above

Student Name: Ariana Reyes
Grade: 12
School: Galena Park High School
Title: Stages of Blue
Category: Personal Essay & Memoir
Key: Silver Key
Educator: Kendra Walker

I have always been a sitting duck. I never understood why I was so defenseless and oblivious to danger within my surroundings. Maybe it was because I was just a child and my brain hadn't developed enough to sense danger or perhaps it was because the source was undetectable and unexpected: my mother.

Vulnerable. It was late at night when I sat alone at my kitchen table. The front door of my grandma's house swung open and my mother began stumbling through the door and into the kitchen with her Lucchese boots and lipstick smeared all over her face. Initially, she said nothing to me yet the look on her face spoke a million. She pointed at the fridge and said in a slurred tone, "Give me one of the blue cans." For the first time, I was scared of my mother. I felt something bad would have happened had I not done what she told me. I first gave in to her demands at the age of 9.

Dependent. I was at the zoo with my parents and sister. We were passing by the elephant exhibit and heard all the beautiful sounds of nature when my mother asked if I needed to use the restroom. I agreed and after we stopped by the bathroom, we stopped at a beverage stand. From the Texas heat, I assumed my mother was thirsty for water like I was, yet my instincts were wrong. Instead of buying us water, she bought herself a metal blue can that she would down within minutes. I never got my water and remained thirsty until I told my father.

Resentment. It was midnight when I heard the repeated opening of metal cans. My father began work in Louisiana and my sister moved out of our house. The only person I could blame for the annoying noise was my mother. That horrible sound echoed through our thin walls. Psssssch 12:01am. Psssssch 12:27am. Psssssch 12:42 am. I couldn't sleep and was upset because of it. But was that the only reason I was resentful of the sound?

Disappointment. In 11th grade, my school held an awards ceremony. I was going to be receiving an academic award and my letterman, so I was ecstatic. I reminded my mom the day prior what time she needed to be there and yet, she showed up late with her purse stocked with three metal cans and was wobbling when she tried to take pictures of me. I didn't recognize her face and her words made no sense. I was heartbroken when I realized she was not even going to remember the night when she woke up the next day. Maybe it wasn't an important event for her, but it was to me. I guess it was wrong of me to assume an important event to me meant anything to my mother.

Isolation. I seemed to always be in my room during middle and high school. I couldn't talk to my father because he was out of town, my sister moved out, and my mom was too occupied with her blue cans. I couldn't talk to my mom about how I was feeling because she would say that I was being dramatic and ungrateful. How was I ungrateful for something I shouldn't have been dealing with as a child? I was jealous of my friends who did not have to endure the pain and suffering I did over the years. The feelings of sadness and seclusion from my own mother not choosing me. Were my feelings not valid? Was I just being dramatic like my mother said?

Freedom. I walked into the robotics lab and a sudden wave of relief swept over me. I sat down with my robotics notebook and began brainstorming concepts for our next competition. The notebook, although just paper and ink, gave me a sense of joy from all the tears I shed and countless arguments I had lost with my mother. Learning about engineering concepts and building something from scratch made me free of all my worries. Robotics gave me an out that I didn't have before. A world of possibilities opened for me: experimentation with trial and error and effective communication with my teammates.

Independence. I was lying in my bed when I heard the noise again. However, it gave me the strength to finally say, "Enough is enough." I realized I didn't have to keep supporting her choices; I could be my own person and make my own decisions about the way I choose to live my life. I was no longer focused on the sound of cans clinking, but robots clinking with one another. Engineering allowed moments of peace to alleviate all the emotions I had bottled up.

Student Name: Maya McCollough
Grade: 9
School: North Shore Ninth Grade Center
Title: The Climb
Category: Poetry
Key: Silver Key
Educator: Charlene Culpepper

It's cold down here
The darkness is almost suffocating
A shiver racks through my body as I sit in this abyss.
This almost nothingness

I run as fast as my legs can take
And I keep going till I can no longer feel anything.
I no longer am aware of myself, my feelings, my thoughts, my health
I struggle to look past the darkness into the light
But the light seems nowhere in sight.

As though there is no space in this abyss for the good of the night
This space is not where you want to be at night
But I am stuck here as though I'm in a magician's magic box,
As though the only person that can let me out is the puppet master of my thoughts.

This nothingness frightens me to my core
As if I'm a soldier at war
And as much as I want to stop
I keep going in hopes to find something in this dark

The trees blowing in the wind as the dark moon falls
The noises surround me like a blanket in the chilly fall
And as I look around and realize that I am alone
I also realize that this does not feel like home

This dark dreary forest is not safe at all.
It is cold and dark and haunts my soul
But I make no movement to leave this place
Because it connects me to something deeper in my brain

I should run as far as my legs take me
until I'm out a breath and shaking on my knees
But I stay in that same spot looking at the trees
The same trees blowing in the wind as the dark moon leaves
The same trees that are telling me a story with their flowing leaves

This area does not feel like home
But the trees make for protection in this confusing darkness of the world
The trees are acting as protectors to my heart
The trees are there to guide me through the dark

As the trees guide me to where I should have been at the start
I realize that the trees make so much more than just shadows in the dark
They make for friends that have been with you from the start

Because without those trees.

I would have lost myself in the dark.

The thought of being alone haunts me.

Going out into the world with nothing but the clothes on my back is jarring

Where do I belong rather than in my mothers arms?

In my Father's careful watch.

With my sister's playful taunts.

Where do I go if it's not with my family

With the people I cherish through eternity.

If not here then where?

In the big city with rats on the streets?

Or in quiet towns where gas stations are miles out of reach.

Where do I go if not the home I grew up in.

You do not really expect me to leave?

The comfort of my home is all I've known and will forever be

But sometimes I can't help but imagine what the world would be.

If I take a deep breath and venture out farther than the eye could see.

How far will I get if it is just me.

I know one day I will have to go far away

Somewhere where my parents are not just a phone call away

Because if I do not go far

Then I will never discover what great things I can be.

Student Name: Miranda Marroquin
Grade: 10
School: North Shore Senior High School
Title: The Day Anxiety Seeped Through the Trenches
Category: Poetry
Key: Silver Key
Educator: Manuel Marasigan

The feeling of unending fear and uneasiness
Judgment is going on all around
The constant panic at the thought of people
This is anxiety

The filling of my lungs with sharp air
The racing thoughts in my brain
The heavy pounding in my chest
This is anxiety

The suffocating air surrounding my body
The everlasting paranoia of being stared at
The persistent perspiring covering my hands and face
The feeling that haunts me
This is anxiety

However, the feeling of the warm sun while sitting in a park
The soothing whistling of the trees while going on a walk
The comfortable conversations of the people surrounding me
This is NOT anxiety

The consolatory chorus of my favorite song

The refreshing laugh of my dearest person

The satisfying sound of a page turning in my cherished book

This is serenity

The warm coffee on a cold winter morning

The soft feeling of a blanket on my skin

The crackling of the wood in a fireplace on a wintry night

The calming presence of a loved one

This is tranquility

Student Name: Sonia Pappachan
Grade: 8
School: North Shore Middle School
Title: The mask of a million faces
Category: Poetry
Key: Silver Key
Educator: Victor Resendiz

The mask of a million faces

BUZZ, BUZZ

You wake up, brush your teeth, get dressed, and do anything thing else you can think of.

But, oh wait you forgot one crucial step in your routine.

The mask of a million faces.

Not the masquerade, theater, or surgical masks I am talking about the mental, the experimental, the detrimental.

The mask, like a genie, grants the daily personas.

Happy, sad, mad, annoyed, terrified, petrified.

The place you confide.

There are many reasons to put it on but you feel as if it is calling you.

As if it is biological as if it has feelings, or if it would feel like an outcast more than you.

That thing is the main reason you haven't lost, it is the reason you are "behaved" according to society's standards to fit in, what you oh so badly want in life.

It's not a goal it is compliance, or in simple words, an agreement to where you lose who you are because you want to be perceived as someone else

As one of your personas.

Society knows how to play the game but you don't have the instruction manual.

It is all a game.

That is all it is.

Mind games.

BUZZ, BUZZ

You wake up

You'll repeat the process till you wake up and or recover. Or drive yourself insane until you are six feet under.

Student Name: Dayra Hernandez
Grade: 8
School: North Shore Middle School
Title: Trust
Category: Poetry
Key: Silver Key
Educator: Victor Resendiz

I'll tell you who to trust
Who to trust I'll tell you
For nowadays you don't know
The real intentions of people

Trust your pillow
She will never tell
The secrets and thoughts
You tell her at dusk

Trust your shower head
She will never judge
Your taste in music,
Or how loud you sing

Trust your shoes
Wherever you desire
They will never say no,
And will always take you

Trust your backpack

He will never complain
No matter how much you carry,
He'll try his best

Trust your jacket
He'll keep you warm
No matter the strength of the wind,
He'll stay in place

Trust your blanket
She will protect you
From the late night's chills,
And the ghost in your room

I've told you who to trust
Who to trust I've told you
For the real intentions of people
You nowadays don't know

Student Name: Kaitlyn Moore

Grade: 10

School: North Shore Senior High School

Title: When the rain made the tears roll down my face

Category: Poetry

Key: Silver Key

Educator: Manuel Marasigan

On July 13th, the world stopped spinning for me

While I sobbed into my hands, the memories filled my mind

Suddenly I'm five and you're singing my favorite song

"You are my sunshine, my only sunshine, you make me happy when skies are gray"

It's July 14th and I've seen faces I haven't seen in years

Everyone is talking about how much they miss you

But Mom just posted your obituary and I can't breathe

My friends are checking up on me, but I have nothing to say

It's July 22nd and it's raining

Mom used to say rain was a sign of good luck

I'm not sure of that anymore, what could be good about any of this

I used to like it when it rained, it was always calm and peaceful

But on July 22nd, I think that changed

I don't recognize any of the faces that are coming towards me with an empathic smile

"I'm sorry for your loss," they say

"Thank you" I respond, I don't know who they are or what you meant to them

But I know I'm too tired for all of this

It's August 13th, it's been an entire month

Just a few days ago was my first day of high school

I try not to think of you being gone, but everywhere I go I think of how I'll never talk to you again

I'm doing good in school but when I get home, I go straight to sleep

Every night before I close my eyes, I pray to God you'll visit me in my dreams

It's December 15th, I turn 15 today

This is my first birthday without you

I go all day without a single tear

But I'm getting ready to go to bed when a picture of us comes up

I cry so hard that it gets hard to breathe, I say a prayer and hope you're watching over me

It's December 25th, the first Christmas without you here

We didn't do much to celebrate this year, it's hard to celebrate anything when you aren't here

It's the first Christmas of a lifetime without your gumbo

I don't feel festive and don't know if I ever will

It's July 13th, it's been an entire year

I got my first job, an internship downtown

I wanted to stay home with Mae and mom

I go to the bathroom to cry every break, I don't talk much today

My friends check in acknowledging what day it is, I don't want to talk about it so I change the subject

It's August 9th, the first day of sophomore year

I graduate in two years

I miss you so much, but I'll be okay

I know you would be proud of me and I think of that every day

It's October 26th, so many birthdays have passed

Rene turns two today

It makes me sad that he only got a few months with you

He won't ever get to remember being five and you singing his favorite song

So I'll help your memory live on

Every day, when I think of you being gone

I remember our memories of singing and laughing all-day

Whenever I think of you, "You'll never know, dear how much I love you, please don't take my sunshine away" plays

I know you're always with me

And that makes it all okay

Student Name: Karly Esquivel
Grade: 10
School: Ross S Sterling High School
Title: Buried Thoughts
Category: Poetry
Key: Silver Key
Educator:

I am buried under the ashes of those before me
consumed by their unending survival

I want to live

I work for those above me

I am their servant

I do not live

I want to live

I have no thoughts

I am stuck in a cycle of horror

let me live

I want to live

I yearn for freedom

I wish for life

this is not life

this is survival

kill me

I taste their blood

feel their hands reaching

hear their sobs in the night

hidden from their children

they want to live

let them live

I am sorry

I offer no freedom

I am just like them

I bleed, I reach, I sob

free me

kill me

before I kill you

we lie in death

we are free

yet I feel no relief

only the burden of my children's sadness

I am sorry

live for me

Student Name: Christine Novelerio
Grade: 10
School: Kinder High School for the Performing and Visual Arts
Title: (Non)Fictional
Category: Dramatic Script
Key: Silver Key
Educator:

Characters:

Ana Molly - a young author with a fantasy novel in progress and an enthusiasm for Star Wars

Dawn - the main character of Ana Molly's novel who was somehow brought to Ana Molly's world

Setting: The setting is Ana Molly's room. Onstage is a bed, a desk with a computer to the right of the bed, an office chair in front of said desk, a dresser next to the desk, and a small stool in front of the dresser.

At Rise: Both of the characters are asleep. Ana Molly is asleep in the office chair, her head on the desk. Dawn is asleep in the bed and snoring loudly.

ANA MOLLY

(wakes up, seemingly startled. looks at the computer in front of her and rubs her head)

Again? That's the third time this week. (sighs) I really need to stop doing this. My sleep schedule is already in shambles as it is.

(pauses as she starts to pay attention to the snoring, puts her hand on her chest to make sure it's not her)

Huh? That's definitely not me snoring... is the AC broken? Or... (glances over to the bed)

(ANA MOLLY cautiously walks over to her bed and freezes in front of it when she realizes she's looking at the back of a girl's head. The girl is DAWN, but ANA MOLLY is unaware of that.)

ANA MOLLY

(in a loud whisper) What the— who is this. Why is there someone in my bed.

(peers over the blankets for a few seconds, dumbfounded)

(ANA MOLLY softly steps over to her dresser and grabs a can of pepper spray. She taps on DAWN's shoulder, then jumps back and holds the can far out in front of her when DAWN jolts awake.)

DAWN

(pulls the blankets off of her, hyperventilating, and she tries to grab something, most likely a weapon. when she comes up with nothing, she grabs the pillow and holds it in front of her defensively)

Who are you? Where the hell am I?

ANA MOLLY

Hey, you stole my question! I don't have to tell you anything because you're the one in my bed. Who are you and what are you doing here?

DAWN

How do you expect me to answer that when I don't even know where here is? ...Wait, was I captured? Is this prison? Hold up, where is here anyway?

ANA MOLLY

Were you not listening? I said you're in my bed. This is my house, duh—

DAWN

So this isn't prison. You didn't capture me.

ANA MOLLY

No? I know my room doesn't have a lot going on but I didn't think it was atrocious enough to pass for a prison cell... Wait, you still haven't answered my question! What kind of person are you to think you'd wake up in a prison cell? Are you a criminal?

DAWN

I'm not about to tell you anything unless you tell me who you are first.

ANA MOLLY

If you hadn't noticed, I have a can of pepper spray and you have a pillow. One of us has the advantage here, and it definitely isn't you.

DAWN

See, that's where you're wrong. I have the high ground and I'm not afraid to use it.

ANA MOLLY

(throws her pepper spray can to the ground and starts gesturing aggressively)

EXCUSE ME? HOW DARE YOU. THE AUDACITY, THE UNMITIGATED GALL. I DON'T GIVE DAMN WHO YOU ARE, YOU HAVE ABSOLUTELY NO RIGHT TO USE A STAR WARS QUOTE AGAINST ME. THAT IS AN INSULT TO THE HUNDREDS OF DOLLARS I'VE SPENT BUILDING MY VINTAGE FIGURINE COLLECTION.

(ANA MOLLY awkwardly picks up the pepper spray can and holds it out toward DAWN again. DAWN's mouth gapes open. The two of them remain standing in place. A long silence follows.)

ANA MOLLY

(lowers the can of pepper spray)

Um, you good?

DAWN

(shakes her head, still somewhat at a loss for words)

Sorry, I don't. I just... You were yelling and I didn't understand half of the stuff you said...

ANA MOLLY

Oh. Yeah. Sorry, I know that rant might've been a bit uncalled for. I get really excited and defensive whenever someone says something remotely Star Wars-related. I've been teased at school for being an obsessive nerd, but do I care? No. It would be disloyal of me to give up something I love just because of a few haters, so I've learned to defend myself by scaring them off. If you were wondering. (beat) Sorry, I don't know why I told you all that. (laughs awkwardly) Looks like no matter where I am, I can't stop blabbering my nerd mouth—

DAWN

No, no, you're fine. It's not that. But since you're so enthusiastic, I figure it would be rude of me not to ask... what's Star Wars?

ANA MOLLY

(mouth gapes open slowly, then shuts)

Did you mean what I think you meant by that? Are you telling me you've somehow never heard of Star Wars?

DAWN

(stares at ANA MOLLY for a moment, then blinks once)

No?

ANA MOLLY

No, as in, you were joking? Or no, as in, you've genuinely never heard of Star Wars?

DAWN

No, as in, I actually have no idea what you're talking about.

ANA MOLLY

Okay, now you really have to tell me who you are and where you're from. Even if you live under a rock or in godforsaken Russia, there is no way you haven't heard of Star Wars.

DAWN

(puts down the pillow and sighs)

You've successfully convinced me that you aren't a prison guard. Fine, I'll tell you. My name's Dawn. I'm from Ledian; it's a small town you probably haven't heard of. But we were forced to leave a few days ago because it was invaded by the Eclipse Legion. Last thing I remember, I was asleep in a camp with my best friend and another guy who escaped, so I have no idea how I got here. Your turn now. Care to explain?

(As DAWN introduces herself, ANA MOLLY's eyes widen in realization. By the time DAWN says "Care to explain?" ANA MOLLY's mouth is gaping open. ANA MOLLY remains that way for several seconds before shutting her mouth. She then pinches herself all over her body.)

DAWN

Woah, woah, woah, what are you doing??

ANA MOLLY

(slaps herself across the cheek)

I'm not waking up, damnit! UGHHHHHHHHHH.

(looks at DAWN pleadingly)

Please tell me you're not real. That you're a hallucination or I'm sleepwalking or this is some kind of horrendous prank.

DAWN

No? I still don't know what this place is, but I'm pretty sure I'm real...

(jumps off the bed and feels the floor under her feet, then slaps herself in the face)

Yep. I'm real.

ANA MOLLY

(pacing back and forth, talking to herself frantically)

This is real life, you idiot. This is not Into the Spider-verse or a fantasy novel or a fanfiction. Fictional characters don't come to life and show up in the real world. Especially not fictional characters that are still being written, for God's sake.

DAWN

What are you talking about...

ANA MOLLY

(stops pacing) You want me to explain how you got here? I know as much about that as you, which is to say, nothing. I'm Ana Molly. This is my home in Atlanta, Georgia, which is in the United States. You haven't heard of the United States or Star Wars because they don't exist in your world. We come from two different worlds, and by some freak accident or tear in spacetime or magic or whatever you're now in mine.

DAWN

I'm sorry what—

ANA MOLLY

I know I must sound delusional, but hear me out. I have proof. Look at this.

(ANA MOLLY sits down in front of the computer and turns it on, with DAWN looking over her shoulder.)

DAWN

What is that? Some sort of radiance projection?

ANA MOLLY

It's called a computer. Or a laptop. Either way, this is another thing you don't have in your world.

(scrolls up the screen)

Read it.

DAWN

Skylar... Kieran... Asteria... Aster... Ledian... the Eclipse Legion... Wait. You said, "Especially not fictional characters that are still being written..." Am I... a fictional character? Are you telling me... my entire life, my entire world, has been written by someone else?

ANA MOLLY

...Yes. (beat) I'm sorry, I know that can't be easy to hear. Take as much time as you need to process.

(DAWN and ANA MOLLY spend a few moments in silence.)

DAWN

Are you the author? Did you... write me into existence?

ANA MOLLY

Yes— well, now that I think about it, I'm not sure. Since it's been proven that fictional characters, or at least in my world's definition of fictional, have their own parallel universes, it's possible that you existed even before I started writing you. How about this: choose any memory from before you were 12 and tell me about it.

DAWN

Hmm... okay, I've got one. When I was 11, Aster was getting picked on by a boy maybe two years older than him. So I beat that boy up.

ANA MOLLY

Huh. Good for you. But no, I did not write that. Looks like my second guess was correct. You had your own life long before I wrote about you.

DAWN

That's a bit of a relief, I guess. (beat) Did you write Aster's death?

ANA MOLLY

...Yes, I did.

DAWN

Why?

(Another silence ensues. This time, the discomfort is more palpable on ANA MOLLY's part.)

ANA MOLLY

Can I be brutally honest with you?

DAWN

I'll hurt you if you lie.

ANA MOLLY

(sighs) According to my world, you aren't supposed to exist. You're a fictional character. I think... whether it's the authors or the readers, people just want a story that will make them feel something. They don't really care about how the characters themselves feel because they're not supposed to be real. No matter how much they suffer on the page, or

on the screen, they won't actually suffer because they're not actually alive. But seeing as you're standing here in front of me, clearly we were wrong.

DAWN

So... you're telling me you wrote my little brother dead because you thought it would make a good story. And not just his death, but everyone else in Ledian. Everyone else who died a violent death, everyone else who lost someone they loved at the hands of the Eclipse Legion which you also wrote into existence.

ANA MOLLY

Dawn, I'm so sorry. I know me saying that won't bring your brother back, or everyone in Ledian, but I really am sorry. I know it sounds unfair that us authors have always thought of you as fictional, just pieces of our imagination, but it's the truth. I never thought there was a real person who actually suffered through all the tragedies I wrote for them.

DAWN

Screw you. Screw this world with its Star Wars and United States and authors who ruin people's lives for entertainment.

(picks up ANA MOLLY's laptop and prepares to throw it to the ground)

ANA MOLLY

WAIT, I CAN FIX IT!

DAWN

(stops in place, still holding the laptop)

Fix it? (scathingly) Fix what exactly?

ANA MOLLY

I might— I might be able to undo it. I can edit the story so that your brother is still alive.

DAWN

(sets laptop back down on the desk)

...And you didn't think to tell me this sooner?

ANA MOLLY

Well, there's two things. First, I was under a lot of pressure from you just a minute ago, so it was hard for me to actually think. Second, I'm not sure how my writing and your world are related. My question now is whether I'm actually writing events into existence or unknowingly recording events that would've happened anyway. In other words, I don't know if rewriting the story will actually change anything for you.

DAWN

Look, I don't care how low the odds are. It's my brother. If there's even the smallest chance of bringing him back, you have to try.

ANA MOLLY

Okay, I'll try.

(ANA MOLLY sits down in her office chair and gets to editing her story. A ticking noise can be heard in the background, representative of the next few minutes passing by.)

DAWN

While you're at it, can you rewrite the story so that no one in Ledian died? I would prefer that our town was never attacked in the first place, but if you really can't bring yourself to do that, at least change the outcome of the battle so that we won instead of the Eclipse Legion.

ANA MOLLY

I mean, I can... But, genuine question: are you sure you want me to do that?

DAWN

Why would I not?

ANA MOLLY

As I'm sure you're aware, you're the main character of this story. What I was planning for you is that you would reach the capital and set in motion a chain of events that would eliminate the threat of the Eclipse Legion for good. If I remove the part where the Eclipse Legion overruns Ledian, a lot of lives would be saved in the short-term, yes. But I'd have to end the story there because you would have no reason to go to the capital. Without you going to the capital, more lives would be lost in the long-term because the Eclipse Empire will continue expanding. Is that a trade-off you're willing to make?

(DAWN sits down on the bed, considering her response to ANA MOLLY's question. After a long pause, she stands up.)

DAWN

Yes.

ANA MOLLY

And how did you come to that decision? I noticed you were thinking pretty hard.

DAWN

Do I want as many people to be saved from the Eclipse Legion as possible? Yes. But at the end of the day, family comes first. As long as those I love are safe and happy, it's not my responsibility to save everyone else. This probably sounds selfish, coming from me as the "main character," but it's the truth. And we've established that our world has existed and will continue to exist outside of your writing, right? Who are we to assume that someone more selfless won't come along and do a better job at saving the world than I ever could?

ANA MOLLY

I guess that's my final proof that you truly are a real person. If the only version of you that existed was the one that I wrote, you definitely wouldn't have answered that way. Okay then, you win. I'll shorten the trilogy I was planning to an individual novel and let you all live in peace.

DAWN

Wait, actually? You're not going to fight back for the sake of a "good story?"

ANA MOLLY

(scoffs) I'm not heartless, you know. I only put you through so much tragedy because I didn't think you really existed. Now I know that you do and I won't make the same mistake. A person's life and dignity is worth more than anything I could gain by publishing a "good story."

DAWN

I know I cussed you out earlier, and I still haven't quite forgiven you for writing Aster's death, but thank you. It means a lot to me, knowing that you actually care.

ANA MOLLY

(smiles) It's the least I could do.

(ANA MOLLY turns back to her computer and continues editing. DAWN pulls up the stool in front of the dresser and sits next to ANA MOLLY as she types. The background ticking noise can be heard once again as this happens.)

ANA MOLLY

Finished— wait what?

DAWN

What?

(leans over to get a better view of the computer screen)

"When Dawn opened her eyes, she found herself tucked under unusually soft blankets, in an unfamiliar room. Unbeknownst to her, it was the very room where her story had been written into existence." ...Oh.

ANA MOLLY

You wanted to know how you ended up here in the first place? Looks like you have your answer. I can assure you though, I have no memory of typing this. I was either sleep-typing, or drunk on melatonin, or just high.

DAWN

You didn't notice a chunk of words that big when you were originally showing me your story?

ANA MOLLY

(shrugs) Apparently not. I was scrolling up, so it's not like I would've bothered to check the end of the story.

DAWN

Well, if you really brought me to your world by writing it into reality, does that mean you can send me back by deleting what you wrote?

ANA MOLLY

That's a good point. Probably. I take it you're telling me you want to go back to your world now?

DAWN

Exactly.

ANA MOLLY

No more questions for me? Nothing else you might want to learn about this world?

DAWN

(shakes her head)

I told you that family comes first, and I meant it. Whether it's the forest or my home in Ledian, whether Aster is there or not, I've got friends that are waiting for me. I don't want them worrying about me.

ANA MOLLY

Fair enough. (beat) Are you ready?

DAWN

Ready as I'll ever be I guess. Before I go though, I just wanted to say thanks again. As awful as it was, I'm glad that I got to learn the truth. Thanks for giving me a chance to write my own story.

ANA MOLLY

Really, I should be the one thanking you. Thank you for speaking up. Thank you for letting me get to know you as the person you are, and not just the character.

(DAWN smiles back at ANA MOLLY and holds her hand. ANA MOLLY looks at DAWN surprisedly, but then smiles and uses her other hand to highlight the last paragraph on her computer.)

ANA MOLLY

Well, we've said our goodbyes. Here goes nothing: 5, 4, 3, 2, 1.

(After ANA MOLLY says 1, the lights go out onstage.)

Student Name: Clarissa Li
Grade: 11
School: Bellaire High School
Title: A Mother's Grace
Category: Short Story
Key: Silver Key
Educator:

Sagging slices of skin folded over themselves on her aged face. She looked as though she had been marinated in a sewer for a decade; soiled and unkempt, her hair resembled the prickly weeds overgrown in her garden. Ruth Beckett staggered arduously through rooms of peeling wallpaper and crumbling asbestos plaster walls. She eased herself into her browning armchair in the living room. Like clockwork, she took out needles and yarn to knit hats and gloves. Later, she would hobble down to the supermarket to donate these hats and gloves to the cardboard box that proclaimed it was for "CHILDREN IN NEED." She had unfailingly sat in the same chair, knitted the same old hats and gloves, and donated to the old cardboard box for years. That day was supposed to be no different.

Oftentimes, Ruth was not able to stuff her thoughts into loops and rows— she could not lose herself in knits and purls. Instead, her frail mind began to stitch together cottony wisps of her past. That is how that day started.

"David! You silly man, that armchair looks absolutely atrocious against our pretty wallpaper," she said, playfully hitting his shoulder.

"Ruth, a man needs soft chairs after he comes home from a hard day's work. And you too, my lover. Doesn't the idea of a red plush armchair sound terrific after you come home from that job of yours?" David pleaded as he took Ruth's hands.

"Well, why should I need an armchair to hold me when I have someone like you to hold me instead?" she smiled coquettishly at him.

David grinned at her and kissed the ring on her finger. "You can have both, darling."

And she did have both and more. She had it all— a growing baby, a loving husband, and a gorgeous home. At the age of 25, Ruth Beckett had the world.

Ruth set down her bowl of soup. The armchair was stained and had grown to form almost a mold around the shape of Ruth. She stirred her soup aimlessly. A few chunks of leftover haphazardly cut vegetables drifted around.

She used to set out the table, light a candle, and pull two empty chairs up to the kitchen table. She would make her husband and daughter's favorite dishes, almost as if she could magic them both back to their dinner table.

For the past decade, however, Ruth had been using the microwave more than the stove, watching the dull yellow light fade with a faint beeping when she opened the microwave door. There was no reason to cook if there was nobody to cook for. Instead of lighting a candle for her husband at the dinner table, she would instead light candles at the altar. It was one of two places in the house meticulously dusted and cleaned, still as beautifully ornate and sacrosanct as ever.

The other place was Gracie's bedroom.

"Mommmyyy," she whined. "Why can't I ride the school bus?"

"Gracie, Mommy just wants to spend more time with you!" Ruth glanced into the rearview mirror, only to find her daughter pouting.

"Rachel goes on the school bus!" Gracie complained.

"Rachel? The girl from your favorite cartoon?"

"Yeah! Rachel goes on the school bus with all her friends! Rachel also!"

"It's always that God forsaken television, goodness," Ruth snapped, "Keep quiet on the ride to school unless you want to be grounded."

"Mommy-"

"You should be grateful that you have a Mommy who cares about you. Some Mommies don't care about their kids."

"I just want to play with my friends," Gracie said, voice thick like molasses. Ruth took a glimpse back at Gracie, whose bottom lip began to quiver.

"Grace Beckett. You know what happens to little girls that go on school buses?" she said angrily. "They get kidnapped."

Despite Grace's growing sobs, Ruth continued, "Remember when that big bus of students got kidnapped and held by a crazy man? Do you want to get kidnapped and killed, Grace? Do you?"

"Mommy," Grace blubbered.

"Wipe your face. It's your first day of kindergarten, and you're a total mess."

Grace's tears continued to streak down her face. Ruth took a deep breath. "Mommy loves you, okay? She's just protecting you from crazy men."

Ruth knew a lot about crazy men. Before David, before her job. Perhaps she should've told Grace her story. Would she have listened then? Ruth threw away her paper bowl into the overfilled trash can. It was too much work to wash the dishes.

"Mom?"

"Yes, Gracie? Breakfast's on the table."

"Mom, how many times do I have to tell you to stop calling me that stupid nickname?" Grace rolled her eyes.

"You used to love it," Ruth frowned.

"Mom, we've been over this a million times. It sounds stupid. Anyway, can you make cookies tonight?"

"Why?"

Grace remained suspiciously quiet.

Ruth looked up from the chopping board. "Why, Grace! You've done your hair quite nicely today," Ruth took another glance at her daughter, "And you're wearing your favorite jeans."

When Gracie turned away with her face reddening, Ruth knew she hit the bullseye. She knowingly smirked at her. "Well they always did say that the way to a man's heart is his stomach."

"Mom!"

"Oh it's alright Gracie, I'll help you make those cookies for him. Who's the special boy?"

"Stop calling me Gracie," Grace grumbled between mouthfuls of French toast.

"Just tell me who this boy is."

Grace groaned and stuffed more French toast into her mouth.

"Tell me who it is, or you'll be baking those cookies by yourself!"

Grace wrinkled her nose. "Fine! It's Danny Foley."

Ruth knew who Danny Foley was alright. She went back to tossing the salad, shaking the bowl violently. She'd seen how Danny would drive home from parties in his white van, high on all sorts of drugs, grinning sleazily at the women of the neighborhood.

She turned around to face Grace. "Grace, I will not help you with those cookies. In fact, I forbid you from dating Danny Foley," Ruth said sternly.

"What? Mom, you're crazy. You can't just stop me from dating," Grace threw her hands up in the air.

Ruth raised her voice, "Grace Beckett. That boy is no good for you. He'll string you along and ditch you for another girl the next week."

"Mom, you're crazy," Grace rolled her eyes, "He plays guitar and sings songs for me at lunch. He's really nice. He invited me--"

"The only place that boy is inviting you to is a hellhole of drugs. I know exactly what happens to girls who get with trash like that!" Ruth yelled. "You're a fool if you think he's good for you."

"Mom, you're always freaking out over nothing!" Grace hollered and stood up. "When can you let me live my life? You never let me go to any parties! You never--"

"Those parties are dangerous! You could--"

Grace strode out of the house and slammed the door shut. Ruth rushed over to the window to see Grace climbing into the school bus. She sighed and looked back at the lunch she just made. It was all for nothing.

Ruth trudged over to the living room and sunk into the red armchair. After a few minutes, David entered and gave her a kiss on the forehead.

"Darling, you know she still loves you."

"Easy for you to say. You'll always be her favorite," Ruth said bitterly.

"Jesus, Ruth. Not this again," David shook his head.

"What?" Ruth glared at her husband.

David sighed. "Don't worry, my love, I'll help her see sense. Danny Foley is a freak."

"Why won't she listen to me?"

"She's a teenager. Teenagers don't listen to their parents," David stroked her hair.

"She seems to listen to you perfectly fine," Ruth muttered under her breath.

David sighed again. "I'll talk to Grace, alright? I'll get her to listen to you."

Ruth snorted derisively. "You're like a postman, always delivering messages between me and Grace."

David refrained from sighing again. "What would you do without me?"

After lunch, Ruth always returned to knitting. Knitting was forgiving— she could always go back and fix her mistakes. Knitting promised redemption— the “CHILDREN IN NEED” needed her, even if Grace did not.

“Grace Beckett! Where on earth have you been? It’s past midnight! Your father and I have been worried sick!” Ruth rose from the armchair and made her way over to Grace, with David quickly trailing behind.

“And look at you! You look like trash!”

Grace took off her heels and tossed them haphazardly aside. She brushed past her mother without even a glance, heading for the staircase. “Grace! You smell utterly foul, like that old Danny Foley—”

Ruth’s eyes widened.

“This can’t be,” Ruth said. Grace didn’t hang around those people anymore, did she?

“Grace,” David began, “Is there anything you’d like to tell us?”

Grace stopped, before slowly starting to walk upstairs.

“You know we love you no matter what, right?” David took a step after Grace. Ruth snapped out of her astonishment.

“Shut up, David. You’re always too nice to her. Grace!”

Hearing her mother’s voice, Grace immediately started rushing up the stairs. Furiously, Ruth chased after her.

Grace bolted to her bedroom and locked it shut with a loud click. Ruth pounded on Grace’s bedroom door. “I’m appalled at you! After all your father and I have done for you—”

“What can you expect, Mom?” Grace shouted through the door. “You wanna know why? You’re always yelling, saying I look like trash, you never listen to me when I actually try to talk to you...”

Ruth remained paralyzed, Grace’s words echoing through her mind. Ruth couldn’t comprehend anything— she could only hear her rapidly beating heart and Grace’s heaving breath just inches away, divided by the wooden door.

“...feels like you don't even love me anymore. 'Cause I'm not your little girl anymore.”

“Grace—”

“You can stop coddling me already,” her daughter hissed. “Maybe grow up like I did.”

Ruth stared at the door, aghast. David tried to grab onto her arm, but she shook him off and shot him a glare. It wasn't fair. Ruth would face the world for Gracie. She felt that she already had. She laughed maniacally. It wasn't fair.

"Grace, if you want to ruin your life, go ahead," she said, dangerously quiet. "But if you want to stay in this household, you better behave and listen to your parents."

"Darling," David began. Ruth ignored him and continued making her way downstairs. She sunk into her red armchair, eyes glazed.

"Ruth, our daughter's just a tough nut to crack, you've got to--"

Ruth felt all the air shooting out of her chest. "I've got to what? Is it my fault? My fault that our daughter's sneaking out and drinking?"

"You've got to understand--"

"What do I have to understand?" Ruth sneered and stood up. "She doesn't look at you like she hates you. And you never scold her and just let her--"

"Would you listen--"

"Listen? I work so hard for this family--"

"Ruth!" David raised his voice.

Ruth's chest heaved. "You know she's just doing this for attention. I'd bet that she's just doing this to spite me! How fantastic is that! She--"

"Ruth, she needs empathy and care--"

"She needs discipline and a man of a father! Do you hear what you're saying?" Ruth screamed. Her voice echoed throughout the house. She turned away. "I'm done with this conversation."

"Ruth--" David finally uttered.

She left him behind.

Her daughter's abandonment hurt more than if her daughter had died. Sometimes, she wondered if it would hurt less if Grace had died like David. If she had also driven home alone, with Ruth's grocery shopping list and a bouquet of flowers to set atop the table. If she had also died because of a drunk driver. If she had not chosen to leave, if she had lived wanting to stay. These were horrible thoughts, and Ruth always felt contrite about them, yet they never seemed to leave her mind.

She was pathetic.

She lost her husband, because she was unable to curl into his warm arms and kiss his face. She lost her home, because he had picked out all of that horrendously matched furniture with her. She lost her guiding star, because David was no longer there to point her to the North. It seemed as though David had taken all of the light in the night sky with him, for all of the stars blinked out of sight, warping Ruth's heart into a gaping black hole.

She lost Grace, because she was too stupid to not care for those budding nebulae that still dotted the sky.

"I'm marrying him."

"You're what?" Ruth stopped knitting. She felt as though she was a string of yarn, slowly unraveling from perfect and steady loops into a tangled mess.

"I'm marrying Kevin. There's nothing you can do to stop me."

Ruth slowly looked up at her daughter, whose face was almost unrecognizable to her. Needles pin pricked her heart. "Grace, you can't be serious."

"Well, I am, Mom. Thought I'd let you know."

Ruth scoffed. "Your father dies, and you act like a harlot," she spat.

Grace rolled her eyes. "Here we go again."

"He died wanting the best for you," Ruth sneered, "and now you're marrying a drunk."

"I can take care of myself," Grace said, crossing her arms.

Ruth scoffed. "You're almost thirty years old. You still have that horrible dead-end job. You're still living in your parents' house. You still--"

"Well, it's a good thing you don't have to worry about that anymore," Grace jeered. "I'm moving out."

"Good riddance! Go live with that terrible man and see how quickly he finds a younger woman," Ruth said, incredulously. "You'll be a pathetic lump on the street in no time at all."

"That's rich coming from you. You haven't done a single damn thing since Dad died," Grace curled her lip.

Ruth ignored her and stood up to meet Grace face-to-face. "You will not be marrying Kevin," Ruth said firmly.

"And why the hell not?" Grace asked, raising an eyebrow. "It's funny how you think you can still dictate my life."

"You ungrateful brat. You should feel lucky you had parents who loved you," Ruth seethed. "You will not marry that wretched spawn of Satan."

"I'll go marry whoever the hell I want!" Grace yelled. "As long as he gets me away from you."

"He's a scumbag!" Ruth shouted back.

"I love him, and I'm marrying him!" Grace screamed.

"Fine then!" Ruth shouted. "But if you marry that man, you will never step foot in this household ever again."

Grace laughed disbelievingly. "Fabulous! I'll leave right now!"

A resounding smack reverberated across the room. Grace touched her reddening cheek. Ruth raised her hand again.

Grace quickly stepped back. She glared at her mother.

"I wish you died instead of Dad."

Sometimes Ruth tried calling her. She never got a response. Ruth would leave voicemails, begging Grace to come visit her. Maybe the house would be cleaned and the table would be set for two again. Other times, Ruth scrolled through Grace's beautician website. The model pictured looked almost exactly how Grace did thirty years ago. Grace stood next to her, grinning at the camera. Her hair was beginning to turn silver. They were beautiful. Maybe Ruth would meet her granddaughter for the very first time.

That day, Ruth hit the call button. She wanted to tell her daughter how gorgeous she looked. How she was glad to have taught her at least one thing right. Maybe Grace would doll Ruth up. She would brush out Ruth's unkempt hair and scold her for not applying lotion to her sagging face. She would paint Ruth's face with shimmery eyeshadow and coral lipstick. Maybe Grace would take care of Ruth how Ruth once took care of her.

After being sent to voicemail again, Ruth heard a knock on the front door. She slowly got up, not daring to believe it. She turned the doorknob and creaked open the door.

Ruth Beckett took a step out. A bright light shone upon her.

Maybe none of her dreams would ever be fulfilled.

Grace Beckett stood in front of the tombstone. "Loving Mother" was engraved across the granite.

She had despised herself for listening to those voicemails. Who gave that damned woman the right to tell her how much she loved her? She had promised herself she would never come back. She had booked a plane ticket. She had done her makeup. She had bought flowers. The bouquet sagged onto the freshly turned dirt. It wasn't supposed to be like this.

"Wow, Mom. I didn't know you could do makeup."

"Well, of course I do," Ruth said, carefully dusting light blue eyeshadow on Grace's closed eyelids, "I'll make you look just like Farrah Fawcett."

The corners of Grace's coral pink lips lifted in a whisper of a smile. "Thanks, Mom. Prom's gonna be great."

"I sure hope all this isn't for that Danny Foley."

"Gross, of course not! That was such a long time ago. He's such a loser now," Grace said.

Ruth smiled to herself. "I'll teach you how to do your makeup, Gracie. Maybe one day you'll even teach your daughter."

Gracie didn't even complain about the nickname. Instead, her smile grew wider, and when she opened her eyes, she saw her mother beaming back at her.

Her mother lay dead beneath her feet. She had always yelled and called Grace trash. She had never listened to Grace when Grace had needed her to. Now, she would never have a chance to listen.

Grace hated her.

Mascara dripped down her face in thick black streaks.

Grace hated herself.

Student Name: Anna Parker

Grade: 11

School: Kinder High School for the Performing and Visual Arts

Title: An Actor Recalls

Category: Dramatic Script

Key: Silver Key

Educator:

Cast of Characters:

SARA (20s)

A neurotic young actress.

TIM (20s)

Sara's affable scene partner – the straight man, in every sense of the term.

THE DIRECTOR (50s)

That one director you still tell horror stories about.

...

(A bare-bones rehearsal space, afternoon. SARA and TIM, 20-something actors, are rehearsing a scene. The DIRECTOR sits in a nearby folding chair, perhaps holding a pad and pencil.)

TIM (as MAN)

I don't understand.

SARA (as WOMAN)

No. How could you?

TIM (as MAN)

I thought you loved me.

SARA (as WOMAN)

I do. I do. It's not that.

TIM (as MAN)

Then what is it?

SARA (as WOMAN)

Suddenly I am so unsure of everything. Suddenly everything is turned upside down. And— just...

TIM (as MAN)

Just what?

SARA (as WOMAN)

I've seen what happens. After— this. After the ring and the honeymoon and the promises. My father—

TIM (as MAN)

I'm nothing like your father. You know that.

SARA (as WOMAN)

He was just as charming as you are, my mother said. Just as charming as you are— and then—

(She breaks down. Or at least that's what the script says she's supposed to do. Really she screws up her face and lets out a few rather fake-looking sobs.)

DIRECTOR

I'm going to stop you right there.

(SARA continues to contort her face into absurd expressions, trying to squeeze out a tear.)

TIM

Sara.

SARA

Wh... Oh. Sorry.

DIRECTOR

Sara.

SARA

Yes.

DIRECTOR

This scene.

SARA

... Yes.

DIRECTOR

We've been over this.

SARA

I know—

DIRECTOR

I need you to cry.

SARA

I was almost there—

DIRECTOR

Were you?

SARA

Wasn't I, Tim?

(TIM looks at SARA, then at the DIRECTOR. He comes to the conclusion that he will be in trouble no matter what he says.)

TIM

Um. Yeah. Kind of. In a way.

SARA

How about we just—

DIRECTOR

Let's take it from 'I don't understand.'

SARA

Great.

DIRECTOR

Tim?

TIM (as MAN)

I don't understand.

SARA (as WOMAN)

No. How could you?

DIRECTOR

But pause after the no. Like, 'No- how could you?'

SARA (as WOMAN)

No- how could you?

DIRECTOR

Better.

TIM (as MAN)

I thought you loved me.

SARA (as WOMAN)

I do. I do. It's not that.

TIM (as MAN)

Then what is it?

SARA (as WOMAN)

Suddenly I am so unsure of everything. Suddenly everything is turned upside-down. And— just...

DIRECTOR

Here.

SARA

What?

DIRECTOR

This is where the floodgates open.

SARA

Got it.

DIRECTOR

But not all the way. Just a crack. And then you have that line, the “charming” line, and then— what does it say?

SARA

“She breaks down.”

DIRECTOR

Right. So you're crying quietly, you're crying quietly, and then you get to the "charming" line and you break down. You lose it.

SARA

Okay.

(A beat. SARA waits. So does the DIRECTOR.)

SARA

Oh— you mean, like, right now?

DIRECTOR

Yes.

SARA

Okay. So I'll just back up to...

DIRECTOR

Right on it.

SARA

On...

DIRECTOR

You know what? No. Scrap the dialogue. That's a layer we can add back in.

SARA

So act it out silently.

DIRECTOR

Right.

(SARA and TIM start to act the scene out silently. It is painfully awkward.)

TIM

Or maybe...

DIRECTOR

Yes?

TIM

I was just going to say maybe we could try doing it in our own words. Paraphrasing. I know that helps me sometimes.

DIRECTOR

This isn't a paraphrasing kind of play, Tim.

TIM

... Right, no, you're right.

DIRECTOR

It's too naturalistic for that. Too... avant-garde.

TIM (almost on top of him.)

Avant-garde! Yeah, that's what I was gonna say.

SARA

Avant-garde?

DIRECTOR

That's what the playwright wants it to say on the programs. "Avant-garde." That or "unprecedented." But he would prefer "avant-garde" because it sounds more intellectual and French.

SARA

I don't really get how this is avant-garde.

TIM

The character names. Just calling us "Man" and "Woman."

DIRECTOR

It's supposed to show the universality of the human experience.

SARA

But the play itself—

DIRECTOR

Forget the play.

SARA

But the characters—

DIRECTOR

Forget the characters! Sara. Scrap the play. Scrap the characters. Focus on the tears.

SARA

So you just want me to cry. Right now. As myself.

DIRECTOR

Right.

SARA

Okay. Um, okay.

(SARA takes a breath, then begins an elaborate and protracted facial ballet consisting of a quivering chin and a knitted brow and a visibly lifted soft palate. It is not entirely unconvincing, but it fails to elicit any actual tears. After what seems – at least to SARA – to be an interminable amount of time, the DIRECTOR motions for her to stop. She snaps immediately out of it.)

SARA

Thank you. I'm sorry. I'm just not sure how to– actually–

TIM

You could try like yawning with your mouth closed. Because you know how when you yawn your eyes tear up without even meaning to, and if you could just like–

(TIM tries unsuccessfully to yawn with his mouth closed.)

DIRECTOR

Quiet.

(Beat. Then, intently, to SARA:)

I don't understand.

SARA

Are you– doing the scene, or...

DIRECTOR

Why you can't get this. I don't understand why you can't get this. Tell me, Tim.

TIM

... Yes?

DIRECTOR

What do you think? Why do you think Sara is incapable of taking my direction?

TIM

Look, I don't want to get in the middle of this–

DIRECTOR

Of course. Of course you don't want to get in the middle of this. You don't want to tell the truth; you're too afraid of hurting her feelings. That's the problem with your generation. Acting is about truth and you're afraid to tell it. But I digress. Sara. You've been doing the exercises I gave you?

SARA

Yes.

DIRECTOR

The emotional recall.

SARA

... Yes.

DIRECTOR

And it's not working?

SARA

I don't know.

DIRECTOR

Tim?

TIM

Uh.

DIRECTOR

It's not working.

SARA

Honestly, I'm having trouble with the concept of—

DIRECTOR

The concept. I see. Tim, would you care to explain the concept of emotional recall to your fellow professional actor?

SARA

No, I— understand what emotional recall is. But the thing about having to find comparably traumatic events from my own life—

DIRECTOR

If you want to be an actor, you're going to have to go to those dark places.

SARA

But that's the thing—

DIRECTOR

This is a safe space, if that's what you're worried about. If that's the term we're all using now. Right, Tim?

TIM

That's the term, yes.

DIRECTOR

This is a safe space, isn't it, Tim?

TIM

Um. Extremely.

SARA

That's not the issue—

DIRECTOR

Wonderful. Then you should have no problem plumbing the deepest darkest depths of your personal childhood trauma.

(Beat.)

So what've you got?

SARA

I'm sorry?

DIRECTOR

What are we working with here? Divorce, neglect, domestic abuse...

SARA

Oh! No. God no. I-

DIRECTOR

Deaths, at least?

SARA

My grandmother. When I was six.

DIRECTOR

Is that it?

SARA

That's what I'm saying. I think- I just had a really happy childhood. Like my parents were great-

DIRECTOR

Were?

SARA

Are, I guess. They're still alive.

DIRECTOR

Dammit.

SARA

Excuse me?

DIRECTOR

That's the problem with your generation. You're too damn well-adjusted.

(SARA glances at TIM. He tries to look simultaneously cooperative and indignant on her behalf.)

TIM

Uh, I don't really see how that—

DIRECTOR

You've been coddled. Sunscreen and seatbelts and bike helmets, "mental health" this and "self-care" that. What happened to trauma? What happened to turmoil? What happened to the good old-fashioned tortured artist? Close your eyes.

SARA

What?

DIRECTOR

That's all you've got, isn't it? The dead grandma?

SARA

I guess?

DIRECTOR

I need to start doing these auditions A Chorus Line-style. Close your eyes. Picture your grandmother.

(SARA closes her eyes.)

DIRECTOR

Tim, this is a good exercise for you too.

TIM

But I– don't know Sara's... grandmother... Okay.

DIRECTOR

What do you see? What is she doing?

SARA

Um. She's... sewing.

DIRECTOR

Go on.

SARA

She had this big white sewing machine, and she used to make dresses for me. I mean one time she made a dress for me. She lived in Florida; I actually didn't see her that much. But that's what I always picture when I think of her, her–

DIRECTOR

Sewing.

SARA

Yes.

(SARA and TIM open their eyes.)

DIRECTOR

Good. Close your eyes. Picture the needle slipping from her hand. Picture her hunched over her worktable, coughing piteously. Like this:

(He coughs piteously.)

Picture her on her deathbed. Still coughing. Growing weaker, weaker... And now: in her coffin. In the cold dank ground of the graveyard, slowly withering away. Her frail fingers covered in maggots; her desiccated, rotting—

(The DIRECTOR's cell phone rings. He clasps it to his ear, listens for a moment, then covers the speaker to speak to SARA and TIM.)

DIRECTOR

I have to take this. Thirty seconds.

TIM

Thank you thirty.

SARA

Seconds...

(The DIRECTOR stalks out.)

SARA

Wow.

TIM

Wow.

(A beat. Then SARA bursts out laughing – that sort of astonished laughter that is almost indistinguishable from tears.)

TIM

You okay?

SARA

I'm just still trying to process that.

TIM

It was a lot to take in.

SARA

Yeah.

TIM

Do you think it– helped?

(Beat.)

What?

SARA

Okay, am I just insane?

TIM

Huh?

SARA

Or was that insane? Because I feel like that was insane.

TIM

I mean, no, it was weird–

SARA

Weird! He described my grandmother's rotting corpse!

TIM

Yeah...

SARA

He expressed disappointment at the fact that my parents aren't dead!

TIM

... Yeah.

SARA

And just the way he directs– This is where you breathe. This is where you cry. Every single...

TIM

No, I get what you're saying.

SARA

But you don't mind.

TIM

I mean. He has a clear artistic vision.

SARA

That's one way to put it.

TIM

Isn't it somewhat of a relief? To have all the acting choices and character work and whatever taken off your plate? To just do what you're told and that's all you're expected to do?

SARA

I don't know that I've ever thought about it that way.

TIM

It's great. It's like high school.

SARA

High school?

TIM

That was like the best time ever for me as an actor.

SARA

High school.

TIM

All the applause, none of the responsibility, guaranteed the lead in every production?

SARA

Wow. That... could not be more different from my experience.

TIM

I actually didn't start acting until junior year. But then I tore my ACL playing football and they were holding auditions for Romeo and Juliet and I thought, "Why not?" And I got Romeo.

SARA

Wow.

TIM

No, yeah, I couldn't believe it. Because I didn't prepare anything, I just kind of hobbled in there and read the sides cold, and it was written in like Shakespearean so I had no idea what I was saying and I stumbled through like half of it. But I must have been pretty good. Because I got Romeo.

SARA

You mentioned that.

TIM

Right.

SARA

... How many boys were in your high school's theater program?

TIM

I don't know, why?

SARA

No reason.

(Beat.)

Okay– I need to focus.

(SARA paces a few steps away and begins rehearsing under her breath. She ignores TIM as he continues to mull over her question.)

TIM

Maybe three, four? No, three; Brendan transferred sophomore year...

SARA (as WOMAN)

Suddenly I am so unsure of everything. Suddenly everything is turned upside-down. And– just...

(SARA tries yet again to cry. She thinks about her grandmother. Which makes her think about the director's description of her grandmother. She makes a face.)

SARA

I don't know if I'll ever be able to think about my grandmother again without thinking about– maggots.

TIM

So think about something else.

SARA

Like what? This must be the only career where not having had a horrible childhood is a professional liability.

TIM

Okay, well–

SARA

Writing, I guess. Writing too.

TIM

Well, when was the last time you–

(Off SARA's look:)

What?

(Footsteps in the hallway. SARA and TIM exchange glances.)

DIRECTOR (O.S.)

Yeah– Uh-huh... It's going great, actually. We're in rehearsal right now.

(SARA and TIM scramble into position for the top of their scene.)

TIM (as MAN)

I don't understand.

(Enter the DIRECTOR, still on the phone.)

SARA (as WOMAN)

No– how could you?

TIM

He's not even looking at us.

DIRECTOR

(Into his phone:)

Look, I have to go, they're just about to...

(To TIM and SARA:)

What is it you're working on?

SARA TIM

We've just been running the scene, and I've been trying to use the Sara was actually just about to tell me about the last time she cried grandmother thing-- onstage.

SARA & DIRECTOR

What?

TIM

She's working on emotional recall, and she was going to--

DIRECTOR

Great.

(Into his phone:)

Sara was just about to tell a deeply personal, highly emotional story about her traumatic past. Now if you'll excuse me--

(The DIRECTOR hangs up. A beat.)

DIRECTOR

Now. Where were we?

SARA

I-

DIRECTOR

That's right. You were going to cry.

TIM

We were still kind of in the process of-

DIRECTOR

Of course. That's the problem with your generation. You are constantly in the process of things, and you are constantly getting distracted.

(The DIRECTOR's cell phone rings again. He picks up.)

DIRECTOR

(Into the phone:)

Hello? No, no, I'm not busy.

(Beat. To TIM and SARA:)

I'll be right back.

(The DIRECTOR exits.)

TIM

Well?

SARA

The last time I cried onstage.

TIM

I just thought whatever you used then...

SARA

Right. Um.

(Beat.)

When I was in high school. We did Romeo and Juliet too.

TIM

And you were Juliet?

SARA

... This girl Melanie Daniels-Berceau was Juliet. Melanie Daniels-Berceau was the lead every year. And I was her understudy. Every single year. But after dress rehearsal, she came up to me and told me she had strep throat.

TIM

So you got to go on!

SARA

You'd think. I was supposed to go on anyway, for the Sunday matinee. The understudy show. My grandad had flown in from Miami to see it. But on opening night, Melanie just drank some Throat Coat, went around backstage, gave everyone a big break-a-leg hug. Didn't tell anyone else she was sick. And the next day, every single person in the cast had strep throat. And they canceled the Sunday matinee.

TIM

Wow. That... sucks.

SARA

Yes.

TIM

Wait, but I thought you said...

SARA

No, so my mom thought I should still perform for my grandad. So she set up a little stage for me in the backyard, with my ten-year-old brother as Romeo—

TIM

Yikes.

SARA

We changed some of the staging. Obviously. We changed the staging.

(Beat.)

But I just remember, in the scene where Juliet finds Romeo dead... I don't know. I broke down. I lost it. Wracking sobs. It was like a Jimmy award-winning performance, if they gave Jimmy awards for Shakespeare, if they gave Jimmy awards for plays put on in suburban backyards. It didn't even occur to me that my personal heartbreak wasn't of Shakespearean proportions. I finally understood Juliet. Maybe I was naive, but I was so sure of myself. And now...

TIM

Suddenly you are so unsure of everything?

(Off her look:)

What?

SARA

I wish you wouldn't do that.

TIM

I'm not making fun of you! Just. It's funny.

SARA

What's funny?

TIM

You sound like Woman.

SARA

As I complain about my lack of childhood trauma?

TIM

Yeah.

SARA

What?

TIM

I mean, I was just thinking about the one line. But that's a good point, like, she's thinking about her past too?

SARA

Um.

TIM

Maybe I'm wrong.

SARA

(Politely.)

No, I see what you're saying.

(Beat. Then, a genuine discovery:)

Like she's... scared... that the rest of her life will be defined by her past. And she's trying not to let the amount of suffering she's experienced determine her self-worth.

TIM

Uh. Right.

SARA

And she's just on the verge of getting this thing she's been missing for so long, and even if it's not exactly perfect, it's something she could find fulfillment in if she could just... Oh my god. Oh my god.

TIM

What?

SARA

I've got it I've got it I've- Tim, you're a genius!

(Enter the DIRECTOR, still on the phone.)

TIM

... I am?

SARA

No! I mean, sure. I mean– Thank you. Let’s run it again.

TIM

I don’t understand.

SARA (as WOMAN)

No. How could you?

TIM

Oh, wait, no, I wasn’t–

DIRECTOR

Go on.

TIM (as MAN)

... I thought you loved me.

SARA (as WOMAN)

I do. I do. It’s not that.

TIM (as MAN)

Then what is it?

SARA (as WOMAN)

Suddenly I am so unsure of everything. Suddenly everything is turned upside down. And– just...

(This is where the floodgates open. But just a crack. The DIRECTOR watches, mesmerized. He hangs up his phone without so much as a goodbye.)

TIM (as MAN)

Just what?

SARA (as WOMAN)

I've seen what happens. After– this. After the ring and the honeymoon and the promises. My father–

TIM (as MAN)

I'm nothing like your father. You know that.

SARA (as WOMAN)

He was just as charming as you are, my mother said. Just as charming as you are– and then–

(She breaks down. For real this time. It is a Jimmy award-winning performance, if they gave Jimmy awards for rehearsals, if they gave Jimmy awards to 20-something actresses who never got to act in their high school plays. Silence, for a moment. And then:)

DIRECTOR

Good. Let's move on.

Student Name: Alexis Norman
Grade: 12
School: DeBakey High School for Health Professions
Title: Beehive
Category: Poetry
Key: Silver Key
Educator:

I found the beehive the other day
My friend goes there to get away
It's just a part of growing up,
but I'm suspiciously thunderstruck.

The bees are strangely docile
Ecstatic to greet me, they guide me to their cache
Golden paradise leaks from the side,
and they invite me to indulge.

I crouch on my knees and cup my hands below
Honey coated fingers slide in slow
My mouth is agape with wonder
A window into a new world, my perspective forever shifted
This is what I've been needing for so long; I've been holding back the deepest stirrings of
my soul-
and now, this beautiful catastrophe begins to take hold.

Day after day, I return.
The low buzz is hypnotizing.
I could stay here eternally,

distracted from life itself-
basking in this haven of sinful pleasure.

They burrowed into my ears.
Incessant noise overthrows my mind,
numbing my entire body.

My mouth is dry and sickly sweet
from the restless nights I spend savoring the nectar.
The sugar high leaves me barren,
but I still crawl back for more.
Late nights stretch into early mornings
I can't help myself anymore, my nadir is right in front of me.

I've explored the rough corners of the hive
learning the perverted truth of what I want.
Abandoned cubicles and fluorescent lights
It's all a farce, but I knew that as soon as I walked in.

These hexagons engulf me.
I'm trapped in the dark, stumbling my way through cascading arches supported by pillars
of secrecy
I've sampled the airy pollen so much;
it bores me.
I need more.

Deep inside the identical compartments, I search for something to astonish me.
Not to mend the damage I've done to myself,

but to make me feel alive.

The syrup clings to my shoes, brown and corrosive.

I'm hesitant to touch it with my bare hands,

but I taste it anyway.

Ashy heat fills my throat; clogging my esophagus, gradually suffocating me.

Then, just before I'm gone, a cruel fire of rampant desire sets itself ablaze

The waxy yellow flames flicker and flit inside my empty head,

rending and replacing my every thought.

I'm spectating myself.

This haze isn't going to dissipate anytime soon, is it?

I ascend to my peak and fall in a matter of seconds-

on a ride I can't get off.

Student Name: Syna Nijhawan
Grade: 10
School: Carnegie Vanguard High School
Title: Breaking News
Category: Poetry
Key: Silver Key
Educator: Max Ostrovsky

Breaking News:

21 dead in Uvalde school shooting,
Did we learn?
A six-year-old in Virginia shot his teacher,
Did we take action?
Students in Texas Universities can carry guns on campus,
Did we protest?
No!
So, what's next?

TikTok is now banned,
that's my medium to express,
speak up, rise up, take action
Don't stay quiet and be in distress.

Another shooting in a day, week or month
We are silent, in discussion to a never end
Hey these are Guns that are not our friend
You carry them like a phone, shoot and strike,
and all we do is mourn.

Gun violence is now a national disgrace,
It's become an epidemic that we all face,
Let's educate and team up so no one is left alone
Mental health is challenging humans who feel disowned.

Team up, embrace, you can be someone's friend,
All you need is a heart, mind and soul to befriend.
Say no to killing innocence and depriving childhood,
Put away that gun, for our dreams to hold good.

Student Name: Anna Parker

Grade: 11

School: Kinder High School for the Performing and Visual Arts

Title: Chapter Two

Category: Dramatic Script

Key: Silver Key

Educator:

Cast of Characters

CHRIS (30s)

A moderately successful writer of young adult fiction which he, at least, considers to be uncommonly literary.

THE BOY (17)

The protagonist of Chris's current novel.

THE GIRL (17)

The Boy's love interest.

WAITRESS (30s)

Professional, matter-of-fact, and totally uninterested in Chris.

...

(A medium-sized, medium-priced, medium-quality cafe in the middle of the morning. CHRIS sits hunched over his laptop, deep in thought. Across from him is a seventeen-year-old BOY, the protagonist of his work-in-progress young adult fiction novel. He is invisible to CHRIS and every other corporeal being in the restaurant.)

CHRIS

Chapter two.

(CHRIS spends a few seconds furiously clacking away at his computer keys. He stops. Grimaces. Deletes it all. A beat.)

CHRIS

I'll just read over what I have. Chapter two.

(Reading aloud:)

I don't know how long I lay there that night – supine in the sweet-smelling grass of the soccer field, gazing up at the stars and contemplating the futility of existence.

(As he speaks, The BOY climbs onto the table, lies on his back, and contemplates the futility of existence. He sighs dramatically.)

CHRIS

School, work, home, sleep, school again. We lived our lives, I thought, like goldfish in a great cosmic carnival bag: swimming in circles, blissfully unaware of our imminent demise.

(Beat.)

God, that's good.

(Typing again:)

Okay. When all of a sudden... No.

(The WAITRESS appears beside him and sets a mug on the table.)

WAITRESS

Your coffee.

CHRIS

I looked up... He's already looking up...

WAITRESS

Am I interrupting something?

CHRIS

Interrupted! My thoughts were interrupted by...

(Into his laptop screen.)

Come on...

WAITRESS

Sir?

CHRIS

(Into his laptop screen.)

Come on! Do something! Say something!

WAITRESS

... Your omelet should be out shortly.

(CHRIS glances up at the WAITRESS and registers her presence for the first time.)

CHRIS

I see. I mean thank you.

WAITRESS

Is everything all right?

CHRIS

You know how when you're writing and all of a sudden you start having this completely irrational feeling of déjà vu?

WAITRESS

No.

CHRIS

And your characters refuse to come to life or do what you want them to with any degree of believability and so you're stuck slogging through until you get something out of them, anything, and—

WAITRESS

You're a writer?

CHRIS

Maybe you've heard of me? My last novel actually—

WAITRESS

That explains it.

(The WAITRESS exits.)

BOY

Smooth.

CHRIS

Who said that?

(CHRIS looks around the cafe. He is the only patron in sight. Slightly rattled, he returns to his work.)

CHRIS

My thoughts were interrupted by a shift in the breeze, soft footsteps in the grass. It was her, I knew, even before I turned my head to see the doodled-upon soles of her pastel-green Converse. The girl from the party.

(The GIRL appears. She is seventeen and Quirky with a capital Q.)

GIRL

(To the BOY.)

Salutations.

CHRIS

She said, her mellifluous voice at once upbeat and flirtatious.

GIRL

Stargazing?

BOY

Contemplating the futility of existence.

GIRL

I just love looking up at the stars, don't you? Sometimes I come out here at night and I see them up there all glittery and I just feel compelled to start dancing. Like this—

(She twirls adorably, then clambers onto the table to join the BOY.)

BOY

Why did you follow me here?

GIRL

I thought you must be lonely.

BOY

We are all casualties of the universe, and our tenuous interpersonal interdependenceships are the only thing safeguarding us from deteriorating into interminable cosmic oblivion.

(A beat.)

GIRL

Interdependenceships?

(A beat.)

CHRIS

Wait– what? No! She’s supposed to say–

GIRL

You’re so smart.

BOY

I know, right?

(The BOY and the GIRL lean toward each other as if about to kiss.)

CHRIS

I looked at her, and suddenly I was stargazing: mapping the constellations of her freckles, basking in the moonlight of her periwinkle eyes. Clear and lustrous, but tinged with a certain sorrow: lingering pain from some childhood tragedy I had never cared enough to ask her about.

(The BOY and the GIRL pull away from each other and look concernedly at CHRIS.)

CHRIS

It was her damage that drew me to her, I think, even more than the fact of her incredible hotness. She needed saving, and I was determined that I would be the one to do it.

(The GIRL clears her throat pointedly. CHRIS does not notice.)

CHRIS

And speaking of hotness...

BOY

Dude—

CHRIS

My eyes swept across her taut teenage body, moving from her inked-up sneakers up her smooth golden calves to the delicious curve of her—

GIRL

Okay, time-out.

(CHRIS startles. For the first time, he notices the BOY and GIRL sitting right in front of his nose.)

CHRIS

Huh?

BOY

You heard her. Time-out.

CHRIS

Wh- but- how-

BOY

Yes, we can talk. Get over it.

CHRIS

Fictional characters do not get to call time-outs.

BOY

Oh no?

GIRL

I thought you wanted us to come to life.

BOY

(Mimicking CHRIS.)

Do something. Say something.

CHRIS

Not to me!

GIRL

Why are you being so hostile?

CHRIS

I was in a state of creative flow.

GIRL

... So listen to what we have to say and then get back into your state of creative flow.

CHRIS

It's not that easy.

GIRL

Why not?

CHRIS

You know how when you're writing and all of a sudden you start having this...

BOY & GIRL

Completely irrational feeling of deja vu?

CHRIS

And your characters—

BOY

Are one-dimensional cardboard cutouts who perpetuate damaging stereotypes?

CHRIS

Yes!

(Beat.)

Wait. No.

GIRL

Or exist solely to be cute and quirky and further the development of other characters?

BOY

Or make pseudo-philosophical speeches that sound almost meaningful but then you read over them again and you're like, "Huh?"

GIRL

And when you think about it are actually just thinly veiled versions of the characters in your last novel—

BOY

Who were thinly veiled versions of the characters in the novel before that—

GIRL

Who were thinly veiled versions of you and your high school crush?

CHRIS

Okay—

BOY

And you start to wonder if that feeling was so irrational after—

CHRIS

This is not constructive criticism.

BOY

Truth hurts.

CHRIS

My books are incredibly original.

BOY

You keep telling yourself that.

CHRIS

They're revolutionizing young adult literature. That's what Kirkus says. And Teen Ink called my last novel—

GIRL

Right. I forget— what was that one about again?

CHRIS

Straight-A, straitlaced seventeen-year-old chess genius Albie Kinneman falls in love with a mysterious girl who signs up spontaneously for his school's chess team. She teaches him how to be spontaneous and he teaches her how to play chess. When she mysteriously disappears, Albie is the only one who—

BOY

And the one before that?

CHRIS

Seventeen-year-old rock-and-roll nerd Gavin Elliot starts a band and is instantly catapulted into his high school's flourishing alternative music scene. When he meets a mysterious, spontaneous purple-haired vocalist named Serendipity Somerset–

GIRL

And you're not picking up on even the slightest pattern here?

A beat.

CHRIS

I mean, there might be some small– superficial– similarities...

GIRL

It's true, isn't it?

BOY

It has to be.

CHRIS

What?

GIRL

That I'm based on your girlfriend in high school.

BOY

And I'm based on you when you were seventeen.

CHRIS

There's nothing wrong with using your own life as inspiration for your writing.

BOY

That's not the issue.

CHRIS

Or what your life could've been. It's called speculative fiction.

BOY

Pretty sure that's something different.

CHRIS

No it's not.

BOY

Yes it is.

CHRIS

No it's not.

BOY

Yes it-

GIRL

Oh, Chris.

CHRIS

What?

GIRL

She never even noticed you, did she?

CHRIS

I don't know what you're talking about.

GIRL

She wasn't your girlfriend at all. She never even gave you the time of day. That's why you're so intent on making me head-over-heels for him.

CHRIS

Celia May Forrester noticed me.

(The BOY and the GIRL look skeptical.)

CHRIS

We had chemistry!

(Beat.)

I mean we took chemistry. Together. But also there was something there. We flirted during labs.

BOY

Did you talk her ear off about the futility of existence?

CHRIS

We had a special nickname. I would always call her Celia May. And she'd pretend to roll her eyes, like, "It's just Celia," but secretly / she was totally into it.

GIRL

/ Okay, that's not-

CHRIS

What?

BOY

Yeah, that's not flirting.

GIRL

That's just annoying.

CHRIS

Well, Celia May and I had this joke together where she would walk away from me and tell the teach-

(Beat.)

Huh.

GIRL

Yeah.

CHRIS

I don't understand why you're doing this.

BOY

I don't understand what you're hoping will happen.

CHRIS

With Celia?

BOY

With the novels.

GIRL

Like are you hoping she'll read them, or...

CHRIS

I mean.

BOY

She isn't exactly in your target demographic.

CHRIS

She doesn't have to read them.

GIRL

Then what do you want her to do?

CHRIS

See them in a bookstore. Be mildly curious. Google my name.

GIRL

And then?

CHRIS

Think, "Oh, yeah, he was kind of cute."

BOY

And that's it.

CHRIS

And then maybe go down an internet rabbit hole about how I'm revolutionizing young adult literature and direct message me on Facebook and get my number and call me every night from her depressing little suburban backyard and eventually leave her husband and job and three kids to be my wife and full-time muse.

(Beat.)

Or something.

(Beat.)

What?

BOY

Dude.

CHRIS

What?

GIRL

Has it ever occurred to you that maybe you might need to move on?

CHRIS

It's still possible!

BOY

Dude.

GIRL

You want to. Deep down. We can tell.

CHRIS

How would you know?

BOY

We're figments of your imagination.

GIRL

We can't want anything unless you secretly—

BOY

Subconsciously—

GIRL

Want it too.

CHRIS

You mean...

BOY

This is all you.

GIRL

Every bit of it.

BOY

You might want to look into seeing a mental health professional.

(A beat.)

CHRIS

And how would you propose–

BOY

Open a new tab and type “psychiatrists near me” / in the search bar–

CHRIS

/ I meant that I move on. How would you propose– that I–

BOY

Scrap this novel, for a start.

CHRIS

But–

BOY

Write new stories.

GIRL

Pull from new experiences.

BOY

Find a new woman to be dangerously obsessed with.

GIRL

He's kidding.

CHRIS

I've tried that!

BOY

And?

CHRIS

It's not that easy. Real life isn't like a young adult novel or an early 2000s rom-com. Preternaturally attractive, inexplicably interested women don't just materialize out of thin-

(The WAITRESS appears again.)

WAITRESS

Your omelet?

CHRIS

... Air.

WAITRESS

I'm sorry?

(CHRIS stares at the WAITRESS for an increasingly uncomfortable length of time.)

CHRIS

(To the BOY and the GIRL.)

You know what? Maybe you're right.

WAITRESS

Bacon, cheese, and no green vegetables...

CHRIS

Maybe I do need to move on.

(He stands up.)

WAITRESS

Would you like me to box this up for you?

CHRIS

Maybe this is serendipity. Maybe it's a sign from the universe.

(He steps toward the WAITRESS.)

BOY

I didn't mean— right now—

CHRIS

(To the BOY.)

Shut up!

WAITRESS

Excuse me?

(A beat.)

CHRIS

Can I kiss you?

WAITRESS

What?

CHRIS

You are incredibly attractive.

WAITRESS

I'm married.

CHRIS

Why is everyone married!?

WAITRESS

... I'll just leave this here.

CHRIS

(Deflating.)

Okay.

WAITRESS

Okay.

CHRIS

Okay.

(The WAITRESS exits. A beat.)

CHRIS

Don't say it.

BOY

Wasn't gonna.

(CHRIS resumes his seat and buries his face in his hands.)

GIRL

Hey– don't feel bad.

CHRIS

I'm fine.

GIRL

Chris...

CHRIS

It doesn't matter.

BOY

Just because she brutally rejected you doesn't mean plenty of other perfectly nice women–

CHRIS

No, really. I'm fine. It's fine.

(Beat. Lifting his head:)

You're right.

GIRL

You mean...

CHRIS

I see it now. I've been wasting my life. I've been wasting my creative energy. I've been retreading the same material over and over and over again.

BOY

You don't say.

CHRIS

I need to write new things.

GIRL

Yes!

CHRIS

Find new inspiration.

BOY

Exactly.

CHRIS

And now...

(He trails off, lost in thought. The GIRL nudges the BOY.)

GIRL

He's getting it!

BOY

He's getting it!

CHRIS

I have the most brilliant idea.

(CHRIS begins typing again. A beat. The BOY and the GIRL peer over his shoulder, then look at each other in alarm. CHRIS stops typing, and their faces go slack. Mechanically, the BOY resumes his place across the table from CHRIS. The GIRL produces an apron identical to the WAITRESS's and ties it around her waist. As CHRIS speaks, she approaches the BOY.)

CHRIS

I don't know how long I sat there that afternoon – hunched over my laptop in the cafe on Becker Avenue, staring at the screen and contemplating the futility of existence. When all of a sudden...

GIRL

Salutations.

(End of play.)

Student Name: Amruta Nangarla
Grade: 9
School: Carnegie Vanguard High School
Title: disintegrating
Category: Poetry
Key: Silver Key
Educator: Rachel Bohenic

The fire was Burning, Fierce, and Present.
but it's been fading, disintegrating.
Burning out.
oh it's burnt out.

Notes and nights.
It's hard
to start
Another day
Of work.
After a night of doing just that.
Relax. "don't be so hard on yourself."
But no, what about my A?
So I continue.
Perfectionism starts
an everlasting war
with myself.
Hey, when's winter break?
tired / tired / tired

Parties and pings.

It's hard to

feel good.

When

Everyone else is

Great.

Movie night at home

with your mom.

Isn't enough bc u could

rllly

be at a party.

Social media lets you know

about all the ones you missed.

hey, how come i wasn't invited?

read / oh, oops, lmao, srly :(

Make-up and money.

it's hard to be

Satisfied.

when

there's always

something to change.

contacts. Done!

straight hair. Done!

but no.

i just can't measure up, can i?

Ugly! / pretty / Ugly!

Young and yours.

I'm just One.
in a billion of
teens who feel
like the fire burned out.
It wasn't us.
You built a frame
for our lives,
Thirteen to
Nineteen
years of age
of
Expectations,
Emotions,
Evolving.
it's hard to evolve
into the people we want to be,
the people we Need to be.

But we're More.
than the test grades.
and the posts.
and the unnecessary expectations.
telling us to change.
We're strong.
Talented.
and, Inspiring.

The fire in us

is enough to change the world
for the better.

If only You'd let
Us realize that.

We can't burn out.
We will shine.

Student Name: Autumn Liu
Grade: 11
School: Carnegie Vanguard High School
Title: Entropy's Soliloquy
Category: Poetry
Key: *Silver Key*
Educator: Rachel Bohenic

entropy is an unyielding law of the universe
the tendency for order to collapse
descending into an increasingly convoluted
state of chaos

but on a pale blue dot
surrounded by the desolate dark ocean of space
stands existence
the existence of everyone you know
everyone you have heard of
every human being who ever was, lived out their lives
the aggregate of our joy and suffering
our collective experiences across generations
uniting as a testament
against the oppressive forces of the universe

the mechanisms of cells
of proteins, of tissues, of DNA
the fibers of our very being
woven together to create the chords of harmony
strung to perform a recital

the song of life reverberates
across the universe's stage
breaking billions of years of silence

but existence eventually surrenders
under the eternal, ubiquitous might of the universe
and harmony shatters under dissonance and incongruity
for even billions are nothing in the face of infinity
and order is nothing in the face of disorder

yet, only when a system's entropy
reaches its maximum
is it at equilibrium
only when disorder has utterly conquered order
when direction, disposition, and discipline are erased
when rules and regulations are crushed between celestial clutches
when existence and harmony become footnotes in the tapestry of time
is stability finally achieved

Student Name: Adela Nicolae
Grade: 10
School: Carnegie Vanguard High School
Title: Firefighter
Category: Poetry
Key: Silver Key
Educator:

Children look towards the stars,
Towards towering skyscrapers,
And bursting vials of chemicals.
I look into books.
My mother raised me as an author.

I have dreams of words and vivid worlds,
And dreams of teaching other children
How to dream the same.
Dreams of teaching other children how to
Find themselves in a book on a shelf:
A curious story waiting to be opened
With them as the special protagonist.
Boys and girls, she's, he's, and they's,
Characters the colors of the rare rainbow
And personalities just as multichromatic.

My mother raised me as a teacher,
Because rocket science may be hard, but
Raising a generation to do it is harder.
“Haven’t you read Fahrenheit 451, girl?”

There will come a time when
Science fiction will become reality.”
“I know, mama! It already has. Bradbury was
Talking about wireless earbuds
And flatscreen TVs and talking mirrors.”
“No, my darling. There will come a time when
Books will be burnt to ashes.
When simply reading will become a
Crime of heinous proportions.”
So often do I see articles
Whose bold, raging titles say it all:
Librarians named akin to devils,
Principals pressured by parents and school boards,
Books banned simply for having a minority protagonist.

Our love has vanished.
Words are erased.
Vivid worlds are forgotten.
Future generations are neglected.

Just open your mind,
Open your heart, and
Open a book.
Do not shut cages
Around those with
Open minds and
Open hearts.

Are you not ashamed
Of the ashes you create and smother?
Of the pages and history you char?
Are you not ashamed
Of the fluttering dreams you cripple?
Of the voices you silence?
Singeing their wings with flames
Until they crumble to the ground,
Until they can no longer take flight.
They flail on the ground in shock but
You stand with your matches
And hot magnifying glass and
Wide Cheshire smile.

Do you dread diversity, fear losing your throne?
Clutching the reigns of power,
You embrace ignorance.
Tearing, burning, toppling dreams.
This hate you give, these fires you set
Burn down what you so believe is created:
A beautiful future for all;
A beautiful future for our children.
So I stand, armed with words and vivid worlds,
A teacher. A librarian.

And a firefighter.

Student Name: Emery Goldstein

Grade: 11

School: Kinder High School for the Performing and Visual Arts

Title: For My Daddy

Category: Personal Essay & Memoir

Key: Silver Key

Educator:

Here's what grief looks like:

A thing with teeth. Flat, broad teeth, for pulling grass and biding time. Eyes made of knick-knacks, or buttons, or quarters, whatever can be lost and then found again. Mine has the left lens of Daddy's glasses. The pair I grew up with him wearing. The right is the head of the painted woodpecker he has, whose tail can be levered up and down to fetch a toothpick. Daddy loves toothpicks.

Grief looks like a deer but acts like a cat. The more you ignore it the more it bats against your leg, looking for attention.

*

I do not call my father Daddy until I catch a glimpse of the road I will have to walk once he is gone. Father is the man who never raises his voice but makes it firm. Dad is the man who lets you pull his cheeks yet recites prayers like God is in the room with him. Daddy is the man who you begin to notice the little habits of, so you can replicate them when he's gone.

Even then I do not call him this to his face. I save the affectionate part of myself as a form of salvation, as a way of conviction. We have not talked about Daddy dying, and perhaps he is not. But I am aware of a cocoon forming around me in shiny layers like cellophane. I am aware of the tree I hang from. And I am aware of grief knocking, nudging, beginning to grow impatient.

*

I've been sitting in here for a while with my hurt, which generates a stink like old pages. About a year into his sickness Daddy started to smell like all sick people do, a thick, salty, yellow stink. Like the old dog which has been old for as long as you can remember, and gets older still, until eventually it shrinks to the ground and you bury it in the backyard. When we bury Daddy it will be in this cemetery, away from his parents.

Grief had many chances to find me. I saw glimpses of what it could be before we knew what was making Daddy's legs shudder to support him. Heart attacks and grief are well acquainted. Cancer considers it a friend. But Daddy's affliction is one you would not know

unless you looked it up, or had heard of Stephen Hawking, and how he wasn't born needing a wheelchair. I have looked it up and still don't understand. My daddy has a brilliant mind and a baby face but something knocked on his bones, making grief rear its splintered head.

Grief watched him limp. Lean against a cane, shuffle a walker, slip into a wheelchair. When Daddy's caretaker goes home it is just him and grief, sitting small yet taking up too much space. I don't know how long it lurked beneath lampshades and between blinds until I realized it was there for me, and it realized the same.

*

As though I am something fierce, I dare you to take him from me. Take my father with his soft face and his soft heart that weeps at nothing besides 'It's A Wonderful Life'. You would not mistake him for handsome but you would not mistake him for anything other than mine.

If I were to name a child after you....

So begins one of many conversations in hopes of speeding the preservation of his legacy.

But Daddy thinks his first name is crummy, and his middle name is even crummier. I try to imagine a child with Daddy's eyes and his name, and it makes grief knock harder.

Grief does not talk, but it peels back parts of you and lets thoughts surface. I am the legacy. I am the legacy who will walk herself down the aisle and name a child not after him, but as a testament to the love he has given and put out.

*

I fear this road I must walk. The walls of my cocoon do not allow me to hide, only see what I wish to hide from. They grow thin. I have knocked grief back for a while now, as a relative I am familiar with yet wary of.

But one day, someday soon, I will step out glowing like lakelight, and grief will be waiting for me. I will greet it kindly, let it take my load. We will walk and never quite part. But I imagine fireflies blinking and bits of my daddy in the trees and it's okay.

Student Name: Myaan Sonenshein
Grade: 11
School: Kinder High School for the Performing and Visual Arts
Title: Girl in my Bathroom Mirror on Hair Wash Day
Category: Poetry
Key: Silver Key
Educator:

I watch her step out of the shower,
blisters and dead skin hanging loosely
from the bottom of her feet like wilting flowers;
she cannot keep the towel wrapped
around her body, so I avert my eyes.

She flips her hair upside down,
lets her breasts hang like ripe fruit,
and shakes her hair, shooting water stars
against the wall.

I hand her an orange bottle
with white cream,
she squeezes it onto her hand,
and I smell marshmallows
near her wrist.

She smooths her palms like a prayer
over her hair; I watch the strands
bond together and form clumps.

She scrunches her hair like an infant
reaching up for her mother's hair,
nails scratching off cells to prove
there is life there.

Her hair falls in front of her face
and I guide her to the sink,
turn on the faucet,
and she cups her hands, fills them with water
that slowly trickles from the spaces
between her fingertips,
she brings them to her scalp
and splashes her hair until the curls drip
sweet water down her naked neck
in cursive swirls. She takes a clear gel
smooths it over her head
and sighs.

I hand her a t-shirt
and her hands collect ringlets
and squeeze them into her scalp
as they intertwine into spirals.
She flips her face back to me,
her reflection, and looks away.
Her hands are still sticky.

Student Name: Valeria Perez
Grade: 12
School: Westside High School
Title: green
Category: Personal Essay & Memoir
Key: Silver Key
Educator:

Restorative ecology taught me hope.
Ensured me that nothing is forever.
The way that spring “weeds” compress themselves
through the cracks of industrial concrete, managing to regain their
dignity through the force of their resilience.

Growing up, I'd look out of my living room window and see rivers of glass bottles and
broken pavement.

Instead of backyards—two-story parking lots.

Sometimes out of boredom, or an attempt to be consoled by effort, I'd open my pantry,
fish out a handful of dry pinto beans, and

place them in between two paper towels,
hoping they found my care worthy of germination.

More often than not, those small brown beans, patchy and unassuming,
became large green stems of sustenance. Soon a potted plant became a balcony garden.

It was satisfying.

Through my own volition, I could make the slab of concrete
my balcony

into a little pocket of life.

I used to feel shame walking around my neighborhood, seeing piles of accumulated trash instead of the beautiful wildflowers that littered the lawns of the suburbs across town. I felt for the children in my neighborhood, who played tag in parking lots and the hallways of the complex because there simply were no trees to climb or meadows to explore. However, the fun they managed to have regardless inspired me. We, like the rest of the animal kingdom, adapt to our environments. Why couldn't I work with what I had too?

Eventually my balcony garden ambitions grew into something more. Multiple times, I went into my apartment complex's managerial office for permission to create a community garden. With the help of Houston Audubon and my prairie ecology teacher, I gathered the materials to dig, plant, and maintain a proper garden.

Despite the sun beaming down on my face, I savored every moment tending to the soil. Words of encouragement like "Se va ver tan lindo!" The help and gardening insight from a kind custodial worker. The curiosity of the children passing by. It all fulfilled me in a way I never expected. The sense of empowerment I felt in serving my people, my community, my home is something I aim to chase all the days of my life.

On cooler Houston days, I enjoy going on power walks (and conveniently monitor how the

plants in my complex are doing). On my latest venture, apart from taking note of the progression

on the sturdy loquat tree and myriad of native prairie plants now in bloom, I observed something

less expected. A significant increase in plants my neighbors adorned their porches with. Hanging,

potted, on the ground, all abundantly connecting mi gente in a new unspoken understanding.

This is how we make places home.

To some, undertakings like mine may seem meager. I may not yet shadow the doors of congress, or strike down corporate interests in a court of law. However, what I am is someone who

has decided that change can start with oneself. One community. A spark. In whatever environment

I find myself in, I consistently make the conscious effort to leave places better than I found them.

Whether it's starting community projects or encouraging others to raise their voices, I can find

strength in my own power.

Every seed is an opportunity.

I seek seeds in all aspects of my life, knowing that my ambitions are what I make of them.

I can rise from pavement rivers, and sandy soil, combatting any

pollutants in my life with blooms of resistance. Now, rather than seeing my apartment complex as

a pitiful dump, I replace any waste with seedlings of hope, telling the earth beneath me,

"I know what you can do."

Student Name: Emily Zeng
Grade: 11
School: Stephen F Austin High School
Title: Hopes of the Heart
Category: Short Story
Key: Silver Key
Educator:

Asher watched the sun descend over the horizon, its dying light setting the sky ablaze with vibrant streaks of red and orange—a final, fleeting display of its brilliance before succumbing to the encroaching darkness.

The soft evening glow cast long shadows onto the pavement, revealing animated silhouettes of children at play, clustered masses of people enjoying a weekend excursion, and the lone shadow of the boy standing on a bridge overlooking the sea. His tentative footsteps drew nearer to the edge until he loomed over a backdrop of tall rustic beams and towering steel arches. In the distance, Asher's bicycle rested under the shade of a large oak. Beside it laid a black guitar case with his name clumsily sewn onto the worn nylon fabric.

Tearing his gaze away from the spectacle, Asher shakily hoisted himself over the barrier. Balancing his heels on the narrow edge, he tightened his grip, knuckles turning white against the silver railings as he peered into the swirling currents beneath him. His murky reflection stared back at him, a lanky seventeen-year-old boy wearing an oversized hoodie and baggy jeans to conceal the unsightly marks underneath.

Suddenly, a panic seized him. The fervent pounding of his heart drowned out the noises around him as haunting memories, once repressed in the deepest corners of his mind, crashed over him at once. The voices inside his head begged him to let go, his mind yearning for a release. He imagined himself sinking into the embrace of the icy waters below, finding solace in the darkness that would become his eternal sanctuary.

Nevertheless, the boy couldn't bring himself to take the plunge. The primal fear of death rendered every muscle in his body motionless, gripping his heart like invisible chains anchoring his feet to the ledge. Tears welled up in his eyes as a wave of contempt

resurfaced at his own helplessness. His one chance to take control of his life was shattered in the face of his own cowardice.

Just then, Asher caught a glimpse of a figure in his peripheral view. He snapped his head to see a girl sitting on the railings parallel to him. She resembled a ghost at first glance with her ghastly pale complexion, frail stature, and lifeless gray eyes staring off into the distance. The thin, blue gown she wore draped down to her ankles and appeared to rest on top of some device attached to her body. As if she knew her presence was discovered, she turned to meet his gaze with an unreadable expression. No one dared to speak for a few moments as the two wordlessly observed one another, an unspoken understanding forming between them. Their gazes expressed a thousand words—the desolation, the fear, the exhaustion.

She broke the silence first, her pale lips barely moving as she whispered, “Don’t.”

The word hung in the air like a fragile thread between them. Asher didn’t know how to respond, so he answered with another question.

“Why?”

“You have something to live for,” she stated plainly.

“What about you?”

The question was met with silence. Her face was a mask devoid of any feeling, but underneath, her eyes were swimming with an imperceptible emotion. Exhaustion, he realized.

Before the boy could formulate his thoughts, she vanished from sight, her soles landing on the pavement with a soft thump. Asher also scrambled to climb back over the railings.

Abruptly finding himself face-to-face with her, Asher held out his right hand in an attempt to introduce himself, “Hi, I’m Asher.”

The girl's eyes slightly widened at his sudden gesture, observing his extended hand for a few seconds before holding out her own to loosely shake it, "Elaine."

"I was wondering what you meant earlier...why do you think I have something to live for?"

She cocked up one eyebrow, shooting him a questioning look, "Well for one, the fact that you just asked me that question. Second, you stood there for ten minutes and still didn't jump."

The boy felt heat creep up his face, "How long were you watching me?"

"Long enough."

He ran his fingers through his hair and sighed, "I'm just a coward."

"It's not a bad thing," she shrugged, "the way I see it, having fear in the face of death means you still have a reason to be afraid. There's still something left for you in this world."

He contemplated her words for a moment, "What about you then? Were you actually going to jump?"

"Well I was planning to, but someone beat me to it."

The corners of her lips slightly twitched upwards as she spoke, so Asher reckoned that her statement was meant to be a joke. Even so, the boy couldn't comprehend how casually she approached the subject.

"Are you...really not afraid?" he softly asked.

Asher's words lingered in the air. Finally, a sigh escaped the girl as her shoulders dropped, her eyes squeezing shut, "Well, I have to. Not be afraid I mean."

As her eyelids fluttered open, the boy discovered a newfound vulnerability on her face accompanied by a feeble smile on her lips, "Because I'm going to die regardless."

Asher's eyes flickered down to her gown, where an outline of the tubes wrapped around her abdomen attached to a device sitting at her waist was visible beneath the thin cloth.

He returned his gaze to her expression, "Does it have something to do with that...?"

Elaine slowly nodded. Then, the girl moved to sit down on the bridge, leaning against one of the metal beams. She patted the ground next to her, motioning for Asher to do the same.

"This device," she began, "is a left ventricular assist device. It basically helps my heart pump blood."

"I lived a pretty normal life up until the end of elementary school," she reminisced, "Looking back, the signs were there. Whenever I raced around with my friends during recess, I struggled to keep up with them. Running was never my strong suit, so I just brushed it off as that."

"One day after running, I felt this searing pain in my chest," her hand brushed over the left side of her chest, "My heart was beating so fast I thought it was going to explode and I could barely breathe."

"I fainted and the school called an ambulance. When I got to the hospital, I took a couple of tests and they diagnosed me with a heart condition dilated cardiomyopathy."

"After that, I was constantly in and out of the hospital. I was on five different kinds of medication. They tried everything on me, but nothing worked," she took a deep breath before continuing, "The visits became so frequent that I had to drop out of school. While my friends were playing, studying, and planning their futures, I spent every day fighting to survive to the next."

“Sometimes, I wonder what I would be doing now if none of this ever happened.”

Elaine swallowed a lump in her throat, “Around last year, they told me I had late-stage heart failure. I got surgery to have this device implanted into my heart, but my condition is still worsening.”

“My last resort is a heart transplant, but the waitlist for one is so long I doubt I’ll be alive long enough to get one,” the girl tilted her head up at the sky, blinking back tears.

“I’m just...tired. Tired of uselessly hoping, waiting for some miracle that will never come, tired of living each day just for the sake of living, not knowing what day will be my last.”

When she glanced back at Asher, he stared at her with his mouth slightly agape, “You’re...amazing. I couldn’t imagine enduring all of that.”

“Thanks,” her lips formed a slight smile, “you get used to it.”

She tilted her head towards him expectantly, “So...now that I’ve told mine, what’s your story?”

“I guess it all started after my mother’s passing four years ago,” Asher gazed off into the distance, “My father was utterly broken.”

“He started drinking. It began with a couple of beers in the fridge that turned into regular bar visits after work and eventually, I could hardly remember days when he wasn’t drunk.”

“I would often find the house being ransacked after one of his drunken episodes,” he shuddered as images of shattered liquor bottles and broken furniture flashed in his mind, “He didn’t just take out his anger on the house, he also took it out on me.”

The boy squeezed his eyes shut, as if repressing the nightmares in his mind, “Every little mistake I made and some days just my presence triggered him. When he was angry, he turned violent—”

Asher rolled up his left sleeve to expose the deep purple and sickly yellow bruises blooming across his skin.

“—I’m a coward. I don’t have the courage to leave him or stand up to him. I’m just...controlled by him,” his eyes glossed over, “I guess, leaving it all behind was one way I could regain control over my life.”

His stomach twisted in anxiety as he awaited the girl’s reaction, half expecting her lips to curl into a grimace or to drop open in horror.

Instead, he felt a light pressure on his shoulder. Asher turned to see that Elaine rested a hand there, her softened gaze reflecting a silent reassurance.

As dusk became twilight, their souls found solace in the seclusion of the night. Beneath the dim, silvery shine of the moonlight, their secrets laid bare and their wounds exposed. Their whispers, carrying untold stories, unanswered hopes, and unspoken feelings weaved into the night's elegy.

“I must admit, it’s nice to get all this off my chest,” Elaine said with an airy laugh, tilting her face up at the moon. Watching her, Asher found himself wishing for time to end so the fleeting moment between them could last forever.

His heart swelled with a rekindled determination as Asher shifted his body to face the girl, holding out his right pinky, “Let’s promise each other to keep living as long as we can.”

Elaine glanced between the boy’s hand and his hopeful expression before slowly interlocking her finger with his. Under the veil of the night, they exchanged a sacred vow, witnessed only by the blinking constellations above.

* * *

Asher's heart lurched when he opened the door. Along with the familiar stench of alcohol, he spotted the unmistakable silhouette of his father towering over him, who should have long left for his night shift by that time.

"Well, well, well. Look what the cat dragged in," his father's voice boomed from the doorway.

The boy turned on his heel to run, but it was too late.

Not a second later, the air was knocked out of Asher's lungs as his father shoved him against the wall. The dizzying reek of alcohol fanned over the boy's face as his father leaned in, "You think you can run away from me you little sh*t?"

Rough hands snaked around his throat, squeezing until his black spots clouded in his vision. He registered a fist coming into contact with the left side of his face followed by a loud crack as a metallic taste seeped onto his tongue. Asher could only squeeze his eyes shut and lie there, a ragdoll at his father's mercy as a barrage of punches repeatedly struck his body.

Next, he was forcefully yanked upwards by his collar. The man delivered a harsh kick to his abdomen, propelling the boy backward. In the corner of his eye, he saw his head nearing the sharp corner of the dining table before colliding with the hard surface.

Bang.

The force of the impact sent a shockwave through his skull accompanied by a sharp, throbbing pain in the back of his head. His father's shouts were drowned out by the piercing ringing in his ears and bright lights flashing in his vision. The boy's body fell limp onto the cold, tiled floor as warm liquid slowly dripped down his nape.

Asher thought he saw a flash of regret in his father's eyes before the man's figure vanished from sight, leaving only the sound of footsteps fading into the distance.

As the boy allowed darkness to consume his vision, his mind wandered back to the girl he had met on the bridge months ago and the promise they made.

He pictured their evening meetings at the bridge after their first fateful encounter. As distant songs blasted from the radios of passing vehicles, two figures stood watching the sunset. Few words were exchanged, yet they found solace in one another's quiet company.

He remembered the nights he spent by her side in the hospital room when she was too weak to leave the hospital. The soft strumming of guitar strings filled the room, playing a soothing lullaby as Elaine's chest rose and fell in a gentle rhythm, her face an embodiment of serenity.

He smiled as he recalled the time Elaine pushed him to audition for a musician gig at a local restaurant. With a pounding heart, he tentatively stepped foot through the glass doors, sweaty palms clutching the straps of his guitar case. While his sneakers squeaked against the wooden flooring with each step he took onto the stage, the conversations began to die down as the patrons turned their attention to him in curiosity. As his hands began to tremble at the thought of playing in front of an audience, he spotted Elaine's figure standing at the entrance with her eyes wide in anticipation. Asher imagined she was the only one in the room while he steadied his racing pulse. Before he knew it, he struck his last chord, and applause erupted throughout the restaurant. Asher dashed off the stage to pull the girl into a tight hug as he thanked her for encouraging him to give his dream a chance.

Eventually, his mind lingered on a particular memory.

"Asher!"

That day, her voice rang out through the air as she threw her arms around his torso. When Elaine peered up at him, her once overcast eyes glimmered with a spark of hope.

"Guess what? I got moved up the waiting list!" she squealed, flashing a toothy grin, "I'm getting a transplant in six months!"

For the first time, she discussed the future. She rambled about her aspirations, places she wanted to visit, things she wanted to do, enrolling in school again, getting a job.

The boy let a peaceful smile spread across his face. More than anything, he felt a warmth, hope, burning in his heart at the thought that she would get a second chance to live the life that was stolen from her.

His eyelids fluttered closed, welcoming the darkness. This time, he was no longer afraid of whatever was awaiting him.

Asher's thoughts were interrupted by the screech of a siren followed by distant shouts and footsteps growing louder. Unfamiliar hands lifted him up and laid him down on a soft mattress accompanied by the screech of wheels hurriedly rolling along the concrete.

The world passed by in a blur as he fell in and out of consciousness. When he peeled open his eyes, Asher was surrounded by the familiar fluorescent lights overhead and blinding white walls. Several figures rushed in and out of the room, murmuring indecipherable phrases.

As the boy felt his body pulled into the darkness once more, a distinct name rang out through the conglomeration of voices.

"..Elaine...critical condition...transplant now...not here...she could die..."

His heart sank. She wasn't set to get her transplant until three months later.

Over the pounding in his skull, his inner voice screamed at him to do something. However, exhaustion draped over him like a dense blanket, holding down every muscle in his body. With his remaining strength, he forced his eyes to focus, his lungs to draw one last breath, and his heart to muster one last beat.

Dangling on the tightrope between life and death, he uttered a final plea.

“Please...give my heart to Elaine.”

With her name on his tongue, the world around him turned into a swirl of colors fading into blackness.

* * *

Elaine sat up with a jolt. Her head felt fuzzy like she had just woken up from a very long dream. When she moved her hand over her chest, she felt something pulsing underneath. Strong. Alive. A strange energy surged through her veins, a revival of the vitality she hadn't felt since childhood.

Her thoughts were interrupted by a slight knock at the door. A doctor poked his head through the door frame with a bright expression.

“How are you feeling Miss Elaine?”

“I'm feeling...strangely fine,” she answered as the doctor flashed her a knowing smile.

“Well, consider yourself very lucky. You received a heart transplant from an unexpected donor.”

Elaine should have been overjoyed at the news, but as the doctor left the room, she felt a strange twinge of sorrow weighing on her heart. Without realizing it, salty droplets began trickling down her face, plopping onto the fabric of her gown.

Feet gently touching the ground, Elaine felt a tug on her heart as if it was pulled by some invisible string, beckoning her to some unknown destination.

She breathed in the frosty morning air, her exhales releasing small clouds of vapor. Her shoes crunched on the dew-laced grass as she took one step, then another until her legs seemed to move on their own. She ran and ran until she found herself standing in front of the bridge.

Elaine watched as the sun ascended over the horizon, casting its newborn light over the world in a cascade of reds and oranges—heralding the dawn of a new day as the darkness gave way to its radiant glory.

Student Name: Leonidas Boukas
Grade: 8
School: T. H. ROGERS SCHOOL
Title: Interludes
Category: Personal Essay & Memoir
Key: Silver Key
Educator:

"Mama, does everyone die one day?" Mama and I were taking a leisurely stroll through the park as I asked the question. She paused, and seemed to be in deep thought for a second.

"Yes, everyone dies eventually. When they grow old and have finished all life has to offer." She looked at me and offered a smile.

"You and Baba will be fine, though, right?" In my mind, it still hadn't clicked that "everyone" meant "everyone" - including my family. She paused again, longer this time.

"Where is this coming from?"

"I don't know - I just thought of it." I looked up at my mom patiently, and she looked down at me, still holding my miniature hand as we continued walking. Her expression was somewhere in between stressed and pensive - trying to decipher the random mind of a young child.

"No, when Baba and I grow old, and when God decides that our time is up, we will also die." As I opened up my mouth to ask another question, Mama interrupted me.

"Want to get ice cream? We'll bring some for Kiki as well!" She was trying to avoid a difficult conversation. Without a second thought, I excitedly said yes and we walked over to the ice cream store a few blocks away from the park.

Although the chocolate chip ice cream was delicious, it only delayed my thoughts.

Later in the night, as I lay awake in bed, the same thoughts crept into my mind. Are Mama and Baba - my parents, the two most important people in my life going to die? Disappear and never come back? Who would drive me to school? Cook me food? Take me on walks in the park?

A fear of regret came over me - of losing them without having spent enough time together. We would have spent too little time taking a walk in the park and eating ice cream together with my sister. We would have spent too little time reading stories about Greek mythology like Odysseus, Zeus (and his interesting adventures), and Achilles.

Suddenly, I wanted to spend every waking moment with my parents. In a sense, I felt that if I was together with them, they couldn't die. Not if I was with them, talking and laughing with them. To a certain extent, it felt as if I were protecting them simply with my presence. I got up from my bed, pillow in hand, and went over to my parents' bedroom. As I snuggled right in the middle of them, I finally felt secure. Maybe Mama and Baba were going to be just fine with me after all.

"Hey, wanna go to Starbucks with us?"

I stared at my brother blankly. "Like, without Mom and Dad?" I asked.

"Yeah." He nodded.

"What about Vera's parents?"

"No, it's just going to be us, Vera, Ellie, and Theo. If you want someone to come--"

"No no, it's fine." If I went with them, it would be my first time going out without any parents present. "I'll just ask if it's okay with Mom."

Alkis nodded in understanding. "Okay, we'll be waiting for you by the front door."

I said okay, and headed to my mom, who was talking with some friends of hers. I picked up something about the upcoming track season, and which ones of their kids would be participating.

"Hey, everyone is going to go to Starbucks. Is it alright if I go with them?"

"Yeah, sure. Just text me when you guys get there, okay?" Mom replied and continued her conversation. I nodded, and headed over to my friends and brother. Vera, one of the girls there, had just gotten her driver's license a few weeks ago, so she was excited to drive us to the nearest Starbucks. Eventually, we arrived there, and everyone started ordering their respective drinks. I followed suit, walking up to the counter. When I got there I found myself nervous. I'd never ordered for myself before.

"Uh," I stammered. "I'll have a cake pop." The cashier nodded and handed me the sweet in a paper bag with a smile after we paid. Holding the cake pop in my hand, I couldn't shake this feeling that I couldn't quite put my hand on. A mix of excitement, anxiety, a sense of liberation? This wasn't like anything I had experienced before - the absence of parents was almost tangible. I was navigating this small adventure on my own.

I joined the group at a table near the front door, and as we enjoyed our respective drinks and food, conversations started to form. Some were about school, others about friends,

and others just about books we were reading. Throughout it all, I felt that same sense of uneasiness starting to fade. Being alone with just my friends started to feel comfortable. It started to make me feel happy, as it usually does. Maybe I'd be just fine even without Mom and Dad after all.

I felt a tug on my arm as Mom rushed me and Kiki to the gate.

"Come on Leo, we're going to miss our flight if we don't hurry up." I tried my best to keep up with her, but she had legs as tall as me, so my efforts were relatively fruitless. We were heading to Mom's home country of Greece to visit our uncles, aunts, and one of their newborn children. We had already come to Greece once before - that was last year, where we came to see Theia Maria since she was pregnant. The baby was five years younger than Kiki and I.

Once we arrived at the gate, Mom sat Kiki and I down before checking her phone.

"Only a minute or two before boarding starts." She smiled at us, probably relieved that we got to the gate in time.

"Leo, look!" Kiki tapped on my shoulder and pointed at a plane that started to fly off. "It's flying into the sky. Where do you think it's going to go?"

I thought for a little while before responding.

"Probably the moon."

"But then the plane would have to wait until it's night, stupid!" She giggled, and I laughed along with her.

"Then the Sun, I guess."

My mom grinned at us both.

"Make sure you two don't forget anything in the plane. If you leave something there, you won't be able to get it back." Kiki and I both nodded to her and continued on with our speculation, although it didn't last long. A loud voice that sounded like it came from the sky itself announced:

"Attention, passengers on gate 37 D! Boarding will begin shortly, so get into the line of your respective zones out of 5."

I was beyond excited to finally be able to board the plane. After this 15 hour flight, I would be with my uncles, aunts, and a new friend in Athens. Eventually, boarding for Zone 3 started, and we were among the first in line. After the security guard scanned our passports, we headed over to be seated.

"Do you think Alexandros is going to be nice or mean?" Kiki asked.

"I don't know. I think he'll be nice." I shrugged.

"Yeah, but he might also be one of those babies that cry all the time." She said, a hint of amusement in her high-pitched voice.

Mom interrupted our conversation:

"Our seats are right here. Go sit down, I'll sit in the aisle seat."

"Can I be next to the window?" I asked quickly.

"Okay, but then on the return trip you and Kiki will switch spots."

I nodded in a heartbeat and scooted all the way in, to Kiki's dismay.

After ten or fifteen minutes, the plane started to move towards the runway. My heart skipped a beat as my favorite part of the flight began: the ascent.

The plane and me along with it started to pull away from the ground, and soon the entire airport was visible. Soon the entire airport became the entire area around it, which, in my mind, became the whole world. I could see the whole world up here. The city I lived in was like a grain of sand. Almost everyone I cared about and almost everywhere I'd ever been was in that small grain of sand. As I looked upon the incredible view, I felt so incredibly small. Only a spectator in the happenings of everything. I was unimportant. How could I not be - how could someone so tiny be of any importance to the world?

"Leo, why do you look sad?" Kiki asked. Surprised, I asked her how she knew.

"Are you a mind reader of something?" Kiki laughed.

"No, I just kind of knew. What are you sad about?" As I explained to her my dilemma, she grinned at me. "Don't you remember the book Mom read us last night?"

I shook my head.

"No.."

"She read us the story about Horton by Dr. Seuss, and in the book it said right there: "A person's a person, no matter how small."" She smiled at me. "People are important, aren't they?"

I nodded. "Thanks, Kiki."

"You're welcome." She replied simply, and went back to watching the movie on her screen. I thought about Kiki's words. She was right. A person's a person, no matter if it's me, Kiki, Mom, or anyone in the world. We are all people, and people are important. Maybe I'll be just fine, even if I'm living in my grain of sand city, in a speck of salt house, with my tiny sister and tiny parents.

For all of my planning, my work, my dedication, I'd never expected to end up on a sinking cardboard ship. The lights glared in my eyes as I desperately tried to flail the paddles against the water, only for the boat to barely move an inch. Sinking with me was the weeks of time, dedication, excitement, and anxiety that came with the cardboard boat. Some of my teammates screamed at me to shift my weight one way or another, others told me to just keep paddling and I'd make it. I tried everything to save the project, but all attempts were fruitless. As the boat finally succumbed to the water, there was only one thought repeating in my mind:

I have failed. Miserably.

The project had a simple premise, but was challenging in its own way: Make a boat using only cardboard and tape, and use it to sail from one end of the school swimming pool to the other - I made it one quarter of the way to one end of the swimming pool, only one eighth of what I was required.

Thankfully, the teacher was kind enough to let my team off with a 75, but the sting of failure still remained for the rest of the day. I simply didn't understand. I did everything I was supposed to. I planned everything out with my team, I did the hard work, I wrote up strategies, I devoted substantial time to the boat project... Was I missing something? Did I not work hard enough? Perhaps I was simply destined to fail.

My disappointment in the results of the project lingered in the back of my head the whole day, up until the last bell rang at 3:15. As I headed over to the carpool lane, I saw my dad's car. He appeared to be talking to someone on the phone, so I gave him a nod of acknowledgement and went to sit down in the shotgun seat.

"Leo, why do you look sad?" My dad asked.

"No, I'm more disappointed than sad." I replied.

"What for?"

I took a deep breath, and explained to him what happened.

"You know the boat project I was working on?"

"Yeah, in exploratory science, right?"

I nodded to him and continued.

"Well, I messed up on it - I got a 75. I don't even know what I did wrong, I - it's not like I didn't work hard or anything - it's just - I don't know"

My dad took a deep breath, and placed his hand on my shoulder.

“You know, I don’t doubt that you worked hard on it. I saw you researching and making plans and all at home. Sometimes things just don’t go our way, and we have to make the best of it.”

I looked at him, smiling slightly, and let his words wash over me.

Looking back, it didn’t really matter that I got a 75. It wouldn’t have mattered if I got a 75 or a 100 or a 0. What mattered wasn’t the grade, or the failure, but that I learned something from it - and I did. I learned so much from the project itself, but the biggest lesson was nothing academic. The lesson was that failure will happen. It’s inevitable. The whole point is learning how to get up on my feet after that failure, so when that failure hits me again - and it will - I will be just fine.

Student Name: Anna Parker

Grade: 11

School: Kinder High School for the Performing and Visual Arts

Title: Ketchup & Mustard

Category: Dramatic Script

Key: Silver Key

Educator:

Cast of Characters

HUGO

An artist. 20s.

EMILY

A poet. 20s.

THE CURATOR

An enigma. Ageless.

The Time

The present.

The Place

A small art gallery.

(An art gallery, afternoon. HUGO and EMILY stand in front of a large, ugly red-and-yellow splatter painting.)

HUGO

So what do you think? Do you like it?

EMILY

It's... Wow.

(A beat. "Wow" is right. And EMILY is inscrutable.)

HUGO

You don't like it. You... do like it. You... think...

EMILY

I love it, Hugo. Really. It's... No, I mean, I think I was just kind of expecting... I love it.

HUGO

But.

EMILY

Well, okay, I'm just curious— And this isn't a criticism—

HUGO

I can take criticism. I'm really good at taking criticism.

EMILY

... Am I missing something?

(Quickly.)

Just because you kept saying I was going to love it, / you couldn't wait for me to see it,
and it seemed so special to you that I almost thought... //

HUGO

/ And you do! Right? // What?

EMILY

I don't know. That it would be of me, maybe? Or- us? And obviously it isn't, on the
surface, but I thought maybe there was some kind of deeper meaning related to-

HUGO

Oh. Yeah, no.

EMILY

What does it mean, then?

(Off his too-casual shrug.)

You... don't know?

HUGO

Does everything have to mean something?

EMILY

What kind of question is that?

HUGO

Like when you write poems. Does everything mean something?

EMILY

Yes.

HUGO

Like the one you sent me last week, about the twin oak trees over the bench in the park...

EMILY

Very funny.

HUGO

What?

EMILY

... I'm going to assume you're kidding right now and you did in fact pick up on the very obvious metaphor for our / relationship—

HUGO

/ Kidding! Yes. Totally. The... metaphor...

(Off her look.)

... I guess I might have kind of skimmed parts of it.

(Off her look.)

Sorry. I'm sorry. But that's what I don't get about poetry is, if you know what you want to say then why don't you just say it and get it over with?

EMILY

I don't see how it's possible for you to spend—

(Taking a closer look at the painting.)

... however long you spent on a piece of art and not know what you want to say.

(THE CURATOR chuckles. HUGO and EMILY exchange bewildered glances.)

THE CURATOR

That's what you'd think, isn't it?

(THE CURATOR bursts through the canvas of HUGO's painting. He is nattily dressed in a three-piece suit and covered from head to toe in splatter paint.)

THE CURATOR

Poor, naive Emily.

EMILY HUGO

Who are you? How did you just— do that?

THE CURATOR

I am the Curator.

EMILY

You mean of the gallery?

THE CURATOR

More than that, darling. The Curator. Capital C. I filter through the dreck and drivel of the world in search of everlasting beauty.

EMILY (to HUGO.)

Do you know this guy?

HUGO (to EMILY.)

Uh. No.

THE CURATOR

I decided which cave paintings lasted into the Holocene. Which pictures were hung on the walls of the Louvre. Which crayon drawings your parents put up on the refrigerator. I discovered the Mona Lisa and the Venus de Milo and that banana duct-taped to the wall that sold for a hundred and twenty thousand dollars. I'm basically a minor deity.

EMILY

... My parents only ever put my sister's drawings up on the refrigerator.

THE CURATOR

Precisely. Yours were very bad.

EMILY

(Off HUGO's snickers.)

That's not funny.

(To the CURATOR.)

Well, if you're so discerning, do you know what it means?

THE CURATOR

The painting? Certainly.

(HUGO and EMILY wait.)

Nothing.

EMILY

It means nothing?

THE CURATOR

Nothing and everything. Everything and nothing.

HUGO

Let's go with everything.

EMILY

That's impossible.

THE CURATOR

Impossible and possible. Possible and—

EMILY

What are you talking about?

THE CURATOR

What do you see when you look at the canvas?

EMILY

Splatters of red and yellow paint?

THE CURATOR

And that's a valid interpretation. One might also interpret it as a woman with red hair and a yellow face and very skinny legs. Or red and yellow bird droppings. Or the aftermath of

a crime scene in which one of the victims had yellow blood. Or an examination of the duality and turbulence of emotion as it relates to the complexity of the human condition.

HUGO

Wait, what was that last one?

THE CURATOR

One could argue that this painting is the most psychologically astute piece of artwork since Edvard Munch.

HUGO

Really?

EMILY

You can't seriously believe—

HUGO

Huh. You're right. I guess one could.

THE CURATOR

Now, Hugo. Did you mean to make this painting an examination of the duality and turbulence of emotion as it relates to the complexity of the human condition?

HUGO

Well. No.

THE CURATOR

Wrong answer!

HUGO

Yes?

THE CURATOR

Bingo. And that's all you need to say when they hang it up in the MoMA.

EMILY

What?

THE CURATOR

Maybe throw in a few words about your original inspiration. Just to keep it relatable. What was that, by the way?

HUGO

I mean. I'm kind of embarrassed to say it now.

THE CURATOR

Go on. One of us probably isn't judging you.

(A beat.)

HUGO

Well, a few months ago I was in this diner. Emily was there. And they always have these condiments in the little silver carousel, ketchup and mustard, and it just got me thinking...

EMILY

Oh! About the two of us, and how we're basically opposites but complement each other, just like—

HUGO

... About how they would look splattered all over a white background. And of course I couldn't use real condiments for the painting, because they would've spoiled and also not really stuck to the canvas, so I used acrylics instead.

THE CURATOR

Ah, but if you had used real condiments, you could have made a statement about impermanence and/or spontaneity and/or the wastefulness and profligacy of Western culture.

HUGO

You're right! Maybe I'll make a companion piece.

EMILY

This is ridiculous.

THE CURATOR

Now, now, Emily. Don't be jealous.

HUGO

You're an artist, too. In your own way.

EMILY

What's that supposed to mean?

HUGO

Just because you didn't create the most psychologically astute piece of artwork since Edvard Munch doesn't mean I look down on you at-

EMILY

I'm not jealous.

(Beat.)

I'm not! Stop looking at me like– I can assure you that I am not jealous.

THE CURATOR

... The lady doth protest too much, methinks.

EMILY

You're right: any hack can slap some colors on a canvas, people find it aesthetically pleasing, that's it. It's art. But it's different with poetry. You can't just arrange words so they look pretty and expect people to–

THE CURATOR

Oh no?

EMILY

No! You can't!

THE CURATOR

And what do you think poets have been doing since the Epic of Gilgamesh?

EMILY

No.

THE CURATOR

Yes.

EMILY

Prove it.

THE CURATOR

... "eternally irrevocable / we serenade the void / with a numinous cacophony / of stardust." What does that mean to you?

EMILY

What? Well, it's, um... It's, like... I've definitely heard it before...

THE CURATOR

I just made it up, Emily. What does it mean to you?

HUGO

Nothing?

EMILY

Of course it means something. He's just saying that because he doesn't understand it.

HUGO

Do you understand it?

THE CURATOR

No one understands it. And no one is willing to say so because they're too afraid of exposing their intellectual inferiority. The emperor remains stark naked. Such is the genius of poetry.

EMILY

That's not fair.

THE CURATOR

It's quite liberating, really. You should try it.

EMILY

Saying words that don't mean anything?

THE CURATOR

Saying words that mean a myriad of things to a myriad of people but whose meaning might perhaps temporarily escape you at the precise moment of composition.

(EMILY rolls her eyes. But then she says:)

EMILY

... "at night / we dissolve / into hangnail scars / and cigarette dust. / that is / depression." See, it's ridic-

THE CURATOR

Brilliant. A masterpiece. And you're telling me you just made that up on the spot?

EMILY (flattered in spite of herself.)

Well, yeah, I just kind of like...

THE CURATOR

Breathtaking. Another.

EMILY

"swirling eddies / of existential / hollowness / diaphanous / and haunting." What do you think?

HUGO

Uh. It's great?

EMILY

"crushed peonies the color / of our / fresh blood / beneath / a screaming / moon."

THE CURATOR

That might be the most nuanced explanation I've ever heard of gender relations in twenty-first century America.

HUGO

Okay, wait a second, that had nothing to do with—

EMILY

That's your interpretation.

THE CURATOR

Precisely. Another person might interpret it as having everything to do with gender relations in twenty-first century America and being formally groundbreaking besides. Abstract poetry. One could argue that these few lines are the most poetically innovative work since e.e. cummings.

EMILY

Really?

HUGO

You can't seriously believe—

EMILY

This is incredible! This is– This is– Serendipity octopus kaleidoscope!

(Turning to HUGO.)

Is this how you feel all the time?

THE CURATOR

Yes. Yes it is.

EMILY

Linoleum organza cornerstone. Tomato... giraffe... antidisestablishmentarianism!

HUGO

What's that supposed to mean?

EMILY

I don't know! I don't know. I... don't know. Tangerine motorbike sunset.

HUGO

... Red aquamarine lavender chartreuse.

EMILY

Moonlight whispering melancholy elation?

HUGO

Indigo triangles and pink blotches with a squiggly orange line down the middle.

(HUGO and EMILY smile at each other. THE CURATOR watches them for a moment, then turns on his heel and disappears into the painting. They hardly seem to notice. After a beat, EMILY turns to examine the painting again.)

EMILY

I love it, Hugo. I love you.

HUGO

Splatters of red and yellow paint.

Student Name: Anna Parker

Grade: 11

School: Kinder High School for the Performing and Visual Arts

Title: Party Princess

Category: Dramatic Script

Key: Silver Key

Educator:

Cast of Characters:

AUDREY

A party princess. 20s.

CAROL

A suburban mother. 30s.

The Time:

The present.

The Place:

A suburban doorstep.

...

(A suburban doorstep, late morning. AUDREY, 20s, hovers beneath the portico. She is wearing a tiara and a fluffy blue ball gown and carrying an incongruously modern tote bag. She takes a breath. Does some lip trills. Then she snaps into her princess persona for some last-minute rehearsal.)

AUDREY

Well, hello! Don't you look pretty!

(Slightly less affectedly.)

Don't you look pretty? Are you the birthday girl?

(Enunciating.)

Are you the birthday girl?

(Beat.)

The lips, the teeth, the tip of the tongue...

(Another lip trill. And perhaps some Disney princess-ish vocal exercises.)

Hello!

(The door swings open behind her.)

CAROL

... Hi.

(AUDREY swivels around to see CAROL.)

AUDREY

Hi! Hi. Sorry. I was just, ah, doing some vocal warm-ups... Vocalizing! You know. Talking to the squirrels and the pretty little birdies...

CAROL

Right.

AUDREY

Sorry.

CAROL

I'm Carol. Glad you could make it.

(She extends a hand. Instead of shaking it, AUDREY curtsies.)

AUDREY

Sleeping Beauty.

CAROL

And what's your name?

AUDREY

... Sleeping Beauty.

CAROL

Oh, so we're going full Method then.

AUDREY

Pardon?

CAROL

Like even out here, you're doing the high little voice and the curtsies and the...

AUDREY

It's company policy.

CAROL

You're kidding.

AUDREY

At Magic Sparkle Wonderland, the premiere party princess agency, we strive to provide the most authen-

CAROL

Fine. Okay then. And the costume?

AUDREY

... Pardon?

CAROL

I was just wondering if that's the costume you usually wear. As Sleeping Beauty.

AUDREY

Well, it's my favorite dress. A fairy spun it for me.

CAROL

Yes or no.

AUDREY

Yes.

CAROL

Of course.

AUDREY

Is something wrong?

CAROL

No, no, I was just. Kind of under the impression that it would be pink.

AUDREY

Well, it's blue...

CAROL

I realize that.

AUDREY

People sometimes get confused because they're expecting the Aurora Disney character? But there's this whole copyright thing where I'm actually the public domain fairy tale Sleeping Beauty, and in the original story it never actually specifies what color her dress—

CAROL

That's why Natalie wanted Sleeping Beauty, because of the pink. The theme of her party is pink.

AUDREY

... I see.

CAROL

And I said to her, any other princess. Pick any other princess. But no. And now I'm throwing a reductive antifeminist birthday party and all of her friends' mothers are judging me for throwing a reductive antifeminist birthday party and I have fifteen hyperactive preschoolers in my living room and the dress isn't even pink.

AUDREY

I'm really sorry.

CAROL

It's not your fault.

AUDREY

Oh, I know.

(A beat. CAROL massages her temples.)

AUDREY

Okay! Well, normally I'll go in and get set up, gather up the kids, start with / story time–

CAROL

/ Listen– can I talk to you for a moment?

AUDREY

Of course!

CAROL

Like you you. Not your character you.

AUDREY

Absolutely.

CAROL

You're still doing the princess thing. I can tell.

AUDREY

Sorry. That happens sometimes, I'm just gonna—

(She does a lip trill. Shakes it out.)

Yes.

CAROL

Before you go in. I was wondering if we could kind of preview what you're planning to say to my daughter.

AUDREY

Like everything?

CAROL

Anything that could potentially perpetuate damaging feminine stereotypes.

AUDREY

Right.

CAROL

So everything.

AUDREY

Well, usually I'll greet the kids in character—

CAROL

And say—

AUDREY

Well, hello! Don't you look pretty? Are you the / birthday girl?

CAROL

/ See? There.

AUDREY

What?

CAROL

"Don't you look pretty." Immediate focus on her appearance.

AUDREY

We could change that part?

CAROL

Please.

AUDREY

What a sweet little girl you are.

(Off CAROL's look:)

Right. Um. What a... smart little girl you are.

CAROL

But that's too generic.

AUDREY

I bet you're really good at spelling.

CAROL

She's terrible at spelling.

AUDREY

At... multiplication.

CAROL

She's in preschool.

AUDREY

Um-

CAROL

We'll come back to it.

AUDREY

At coloring?

CAROL

And next is story time?

AUDREY

Yeah, I'll read the kids the Little Golden Book of whatever character I'm playing, Snow White, Cinderella, Sleeping Beauty...

CAROL

And you never sense an aura of... disempowerment? Afterwards?

AUDREY

I think they just like to look at the pictures.

CAROL

You never wonder about the implications of what you're teaching them?

AUDREY

I mean. I don't think I'm personally responsible.

CAROL

Ladies and gentlemen, the problem with American politics.

AUDREY

Listen, Carol, I feel like we've gotten off on the wrong / foot here—

CAROL

/ Right. You're right.

AUDREY

We'll just calm down... Take a breath... Smile...

(Off CAROL's look.)

What?

CAROL

It's just a little hard for me to be around you when you're all-

(She imitates AUDREY's princess mannerisms.)

AUDREY

Sorry.

CAROL

You apologize too much.

AUDREY

Sorry. Uh, I mean...

(A nervous giggle. AUDREY is a real human person in this moment. CAROL can't help but soften a bit.)

CAROL

It's okay.

AUDREY

Sometimes it's really hard to shake off? Like I'll start doing my princess voice in real life, by accident. It freaks my boyfriend out. But you know what's really weird is it works sometimes. Like on policemen? Like- Oh, officer, I had no idea I was going over the speed limit! You see, I have this audition and I'm running late and... It's like magic.

CAROL

That's... really manipulative.

AUDREY

I know, right?

CAROL

See, this is what I'm worried about.

AUDREY

I promise that I do not give preschoolers advice on avoiding speeding tickets.

CAROL

These kids see you as a role model. You know four-year-olds, they don't listen to their parents. But you're wearing a frilly ball gown. You'll have about as much influence on Natalie in half an hour as I have in the past three years.

AUDREY

And I can assure you that at Magic Sparkle Wonderland, we do not take that responsibility li-

CAROL

Last week, she told me that she wants to be a princess when she grows up.

AUDREY

Aww...

(This is the wrong response. AUDREY clears her throat.)

I see.

CAROL

Which is cute, right? For a two-year-old, maybe, or a three-year-old. But she'll be in kindergarten next year. Her friends want to be astronauts and veterinarians. Little Callie

Andover is going to be a gastroenterologist like her dad. She can pronounce the whole word, gastroenterologist. And she's only three and a half.

AUDREY

... Wow.

CAROL

Maybe that's the problem, that I'm not like Rich and Cynthia, that I've tried to let Natalie dictate her own interests. "Follow the child" and all that. She wanted to spin around in a tutu so I put her in a ballet class. She begged for a pink room so I painted the walls. She hated the gender-neutral wooden Montessori elf dolls Santa brought her for Christmas so I bought her a Barbie. She wanted a princess party. So.

AUDREY

Maybe she's just imaginative.

CAROL

But at what point is it innocent imagination and at what point is it my failure to protect her from gender-specific socially conditioned internalized oppression?

(A beat.)

AUDREY

Oh! Did you actually want me to answer—

CAROL

What is the right thing to say when your four-year-old daughter tells you she wants to be a princess?

AUDREY

What did you say?

CAROL

Well. I tried to tell her, gently, that “princess” might not be the most viable career option for someone who isn’t born into a royal family. And you know what she said? What about Kate Middleton? Well, it isn’t for Americans. And then she said what about Meghan Markle?

AUDREY

That’s actually kind of funny.

CAROL

Hilarious.

AUDREY

She’d make a good lawyer. If the princess thing doesn’t work out.

CAROL

Tell her that. Please.

AUDREY

She sounds like a smart little girl. Really.

CAROL

She really is.

(A beat.)

AUDREY

There’s this thing we could do. Instead of the Golden Books.

CAROL

Yeah?

AUDREY

Sometimes Magic Sparkle Wonderland has me do non-princess gigs? Like if the Wonder Woman girl gets sick, or if a Peter Pan party needs a Wendy or a Tinker Bell or a girl pirate. And they do story time differently, they sit the kids in a circle and have them make up their own thing. Like I'll say "Once upon a time," and the birthday boy will have the next line, and so on. That's what the game's called, Once Upon ATime.

CAROL

Interesting gender disparity there.

AUDREY

Anyway. It's always so fun to watch. The kids don't have any idea of plot conventions or time period or anything, so Peter Pan has lightsaber fights with space aliens and Captain Hook's hook gets flushed down the toilet and Spiderman swoops in to save the day.

CAROL

(Thinking.)

Once Upon ATime.

AUDREY

... There was a princess.

(Beat. CAROL stares blankly at her.)

Oh, were you not...

(No, CAROL was not trying to start an improv game. But what the heck. Yes, and.)

CAROL

... Who was pretty but also clever and brave and those things were more important.

AUDREY

She wore a blue dress...

CAROL

That was a symbol of her dual rejection and embrace of conventional femininity.

AUDREY

... And she made compromises.

CAROL

And she tried her best to be a feminist role model for impressionable children.

AUDREY

And she was?

(A beat.)

CAROL

Why don't you come inside? Natalie's waiting.

(AUDREY starts to follow, then hesitates. CAROL turns. AUDREY extends a hand.)

AUDREY

I'm Audrey, by the way.

CAROL

Carol.

AUDREY

Nice to meet you.

(They shake.)

Student Name: Paloma Santamarina
Grade: 10
School: Kinder High School for the Performing and Visual Arts
Title: Really Good Therapy Session
Category: Dramatic Script
Key: Silver Key
Educator: Vicki Fowler

Characters: DEAN and THERAPIST.

Setting: A therapist's office in a high-rise building overlooking a city.

Note: / means dialogue is overlapping.

Really Good Therapy Session

DEAN enters, where the THERAPIST is waiting for him, and sits down. He is an anxious man and can't help but fidget.

DEAN

Hey, doc.

THERAPIST

Dean! Thank you for joining me. How have you been?

DEAN

Uh, alright, I guess.

THERAPIST

Let's start where we left off, then. You've been taking your medication, right?

DEAN

Yeah. It's been helping.

THERAPIST (in a reassuring tone of voice)

That's good. Us medical professionals aren't really supposed to seek help, did you know that?

The THERAPIST laughs casually.

So count yourself lucky.

DEAN

Oh, uh, that doesn't sound too good. Yeah, I guess... I guess I am lucky. Anyway. So.

THERAPIST

And we discussed how your lunch kept disappearing from the office fridge, right? We talked about how when you find out who's been doing it, you should treat them with kindness because we don't know why they've been doing it, and it's important to be sympathetic to other people.

DEAN

Right. Actually/ I think I know —

THERAPIST (interrupting)

Because some people don't have time to make lunch at home and know that others already pack too much food and throw half of it away. Just saying. Because some people in this building can't really get the memo. Well, one particular person in the office next to this one. In the hypothetical I've posed.

DEAN

Um...

THERAPIST

Sorry, Dean. This isn't about me — I mean, the hypothetical. This is about you. So, have you... caught the culprit?

DEAN

Um, it turns out there was mold in the fridge that made me black out and forget I ate anything. So, no. It was just me.

THERAPIST

There's mold in the room where we keep our patient files, actually. I drank from the tap water in its bathroom and had nightmares of fleshy teeth and bending bones for two days straight.

DEAN (awkwardly)

Oh... I'm sorry to hear that...

THERAPIST

The head of the building won't do anything about it, which sucks because I have to go in there a lot to get files like yours.

DEAN hangs his head meekly.

DEAN

Sorry.

THERAPIST

Nothing to be done about it. How's your wife? Did you take her to the movies like you said you would? And remember what we said about thinking of what others want, not just what you think they'd want, based on your taste.

DEAN (nodding)

Yeah... uh, I've been working on that. Yeah, we went to a showing of Rocky Horror Picture Show together. It was a really nice experience, we had fun. Her one true love in life is Meat Loaf, so it was pretty great.

THERAPIST

Do you feel like your relationship is improving, then?

DEAN

Yeah... she was touched that I remembered that kind of thing. And we're going to a concert next week, um, Neil Young. She's really into Neil Young. I haven't heard any of his music but she says I'll love it too, so... it's nice spending time with her again.

THERAPIST

That's really good! It's good that you two are reconciling and making such an effort. I wish I had a husband like you, Dean, who's willing to improve and get help. Really, there's so few people in the world like you.

DEAN

Thanks? Uh, what does this have to do with —

THERAPIST

My husband couldn't own up to the fact that we were distant and it was his fault. He didn't want to get better at all, can you believe that? The nerve of some people — how can you just not want to change? Not want to get better? When you're married to a therapist, for Pete's sake!

DEAN

I, uh, I didn't know you were married. You've never mentioned your husband...

THERAPIST

Well, we're separated now. I mean, of course. It was to be expected. Listen, Dean, a marriage that was consummated in Vegas was never meant to last.

DEAN (very confused)

Did you have to — uh, nevermind. Okay. Thanks for the advice?

THERAPIST

I mean, you can think you're as sensible as you want, but...

DEAN

But what..?

THERAPIST

But I digress. Dean, this is about you — you're paying for the session, after all.

DEAN (grimaces)

By the hour.

THERAPIST

So let's get back to you. I'm not the focus here. Don't hesitate to steer the topic back to you — be assertive! That's one thing we went over a few sessions ago, right? You feel like you aren't assertive enough.

DEAN

Yeah. I feel like people can walk all over me really easily, because I don't like letting people down. And then I stay away from them so they don't give me any chances to let them down.

THERAPIST

Well, Dean, if people are given the chance they will use you as a doormat. It's always good to try and stand up for yourself, because it's a cruel world out there.

DEAN

Please /don't talk about your husband.

THERAPIST

You know, my husband was pretty selfish, and I let him do whatever he wanted. That's how we ended up married in the first place, if I'm honest. That, Dean, did not lead anywhere worthwhile. Use me as a cautionary tale — I've got lots of them, honestly. That's why I became a therapist, you know? Maybe helping other people through these kinds of things would help me discover myself.

DEAN

So you're... uh... using me as your own therapy?

THERAPIST

Well, Dean, I'd prefer it if you didn't think about it that way. We're helping each other. It's mutually beneficial. And this therapy has helped, hasn't it?

DEAN

If we're helping each other, then...

He speaks nervously, trying to be 'assertive' as the THERAPIST had told him.

Then why am I not getting paid? Why am I paying you so much? This seems like it should be, uh, a two way street... I mean... you know your clients drop a lot just to see you.

THERAPIST

Dean, Dean, I can't help but think you're reading too much into this. It's a little bit of I-help-you, you-help-me! Be a good neighbor! Isn't that what the good book said?

DEAN (quietly)

I'm a Buddhist...

THERAPIST

Alright, alright, forget I said anything.

DEAN

But it still feels unfair.

THERAPIST (snappishly, leaning forward — really annoyed now)

Well, these sessions have been helpful so far, right? You're already doing better with what we've been talking about. Getting closer with your wife, thinking about taking charge more... figuring out the mold thing. Dean, really, you don't have to think so hard about this. Now, our time is almost up, so I'll see you next week, okay?

DEAN shrinks in his seat, assertiveness gone as the THERAPIST snaps at him.

DEAN

Okay. Um, yeah. Next week.

Student Name: Manushree Desai
Grade: 7
School: T. H. ROGERS SCHOOL
Title: Seeking Dreams in the Land of Hope
Category: Novel Writing
Key: Silver Key
Educator: Ryah Barazi

4:30 AM

Monday, November 30, 1974.

As I wake up, I notice a speck of light in the corner of my eye. My eyes feel heavy, like rocks, as I force myself out of bed and into the bathroom. However, it's not really my bathroom; it's a public one shared by everyone in my neighborhood. I notice the dark circles under my eyes, a result of the long nights we spend without electricity in our house

Mother's voice startles me awake. "Afhak, are you awake yet? Go get the water from the well."

"Yes bobo. I'll go now."

I push away the curtains, and the bitterly cold wind immediately embraces me. I shiver and curse myself for not grabbing a jacket. I trudge through the snow-covered streets, my feet sinking into the slush with each step. Finally, I reach the well, where a crowd of people are already waiting with their pails. I join the queue and wait patiently for my turn, which seems to take forever.

The smell of gunpowder hits me like a punch in the face. I hear screams, cries, and sobs. What's happening? Then it hits me - the Taliban are here. I start running as fast as my legs can carry me. Thirty miles have never gone by so quickly.

I frantically search for my family, calling out their names. My heart races as I enter the mosque and see them lying on the floor.

"Bobo, the Taliban is here!" I holler as I tap her back.

I stop tapping her and raise my arm to fix my hijab, which had likely become disheveled while I was running. As I did so, I noticed blood on my fingertips. Something was wrong. Upon closer inspection of Bobo, I see a hole right in the middle of her forehead. She had been shot. Blood was gushing out, forming a puddle near Baba's head. My family had encountered the Taliban before I did. A strange, uncontrollable feeling came over me. My skin grew hot, my eyebrows furrowed, and tears streamed down my cheeks. I was angry - truly angry for the first time. I felt a strong urge to put an end to the Taliban, but I knew I couldn't. After all, I was just a mere girl.

I am consumed with anger and despair as I come to terms with the fact that the world is falling apart. To make matters worse, my parents are no longer alive. In an attempt to calm myself, I rush over to my Khala's house, just across the street.

"Khala, where are you?" I call out.

As soon as she sees me, she pauses, noticing the tear stains on my face.

"Afhak, what's wrong? Did something terrible happen to you?"

I struggle to speak, my voice trembling. "Bobo...Baba..."

I am pretty sure that she understood. As she leaned in to embrace me, she began reciting a prayer.

O God, forgive our living and our dead, those who are present among us and those who are absent, our young and our old, our males and our females. O God, whoever You keep alive, keep him alive in Islam, and whoever You cause to die, cause him to die with faith.

Her voice is soothing. It makes all my problems wash away. But I realize that my problems wash up to shore again.

10:30 AM

Monday, December 1, 1975.

I find myself in a cramped airplane cabin, surrounded by the deafening roar of the engines. The sound of the Air-Hostesses chatting with the passengers fills the air.

I ask Khala, who is sitting next to me, "Khala, where are we going?"

A look of confusion crosses her features, her eyebrows furrowing and her lips pursing. "What do you mean? This is the place we wanted to go to for a whole year, America!"

That's weird.

I get up from my seat and walk into the restroom. This one is much nicer than the one we had at our house.

A lump forms in my throat and I feel a wave of nausea wash over me. I walk back to my seat. I sit there, my eyes fixed on the intricate patterns of the ceiling panels, lost in my thoughts.

A flight attendant approaches us and asks what we would like to eat. I sit up straight and request tomato juice and a bar. As I watch her move down the aisle, I notice something. This woman has a job. In Afghanistan, girls are not allowed to attend school, let alone work. There is something about her that inspires me. Could I, a normal girl from Afghanistan, also have a job? This thought fills me with excitement.

I, Afhak Sayyid, could be an author and publisher.

1:28 PM

Wednesday, April 2, 1985.

I approach a towering white building with grand columns and a sprawling campus.

The sign reads,

COLUMBIA UNIVERSITY OF NEWYORK

I guess this is my only chance. I walk in while taking a deep breath. It kind of smells like a hospital. More antiseptic though. I see other students in line for their interview. A group of nervous-looking students stand in a line, clutching their resumes and fidgeting with their clothes.

"Oh God," I mutter under my breath as I feel the stares of the other students. Why is everyone looking at me?

"Do I really look that different? Do my Hijab and modest clothing really make me stand out that much?"

Before I hang my head in shame, I notice another student wearing a Hijab sitting down next to me. She greets me with "Salam Aleikum" and I respond with "Wa-Alaikum-Salaam". We engage in conversation until my name is called by the interviewer. I quickly gather my belongings and make my way to the interviewer, who introduces herself as Diane Murphy. After exchanging greetings, we begin the interview.

"Could you tell me a bit about yourself? What are you planning to major in? How did you hear about our school?"

I respond to these questions with ease, until one catches me off guard.

"Where are your parents?" I hesitate, feeling tears welling up in my eyes and my chin trembling.

"They're at home," I lie.

Student Name: Alexis Kiew
Grade: 8
School: T. H. ROGERS SCHOOL
Title: Somewhere on the Moon
Category: Science Fiction & Fantasy
Key: Silver Key
Educator:

"Somewhere on the moon there's a rabbit," said my father. He was a frail man with long wispy hair, silver like moonlight. There he goes again I thought to myself. Regularly indulging in conspiracy theories and legends of the past made him seem like a madman, unlike my mother. Before she died, she was an elegant, reasonable woman with a respectable demeanor. Long black hair, always tied back and half-moon glasses resting on the tip of her nose. A scholarly woman. As my father rambled on and on about critters in space, I was already halfway out the door to the observatory of the research lab.

The wind was crisp, blowing through my hair as I hurried to work. Tonight the moon was full, glowing softly to illuminate the night sky. I was greeted at the door with a vigorous

"Good evening miss!" from my trainee Thompson. He had wavy brown hair down to his shoulders and was annoyingly enthusiastic.

"Good evening Thompson." I replied, "Tidy yourself up." As my heels clicked along the marble floor, I whipped out my spell book, hasty to begin. Reciting the enchantment, the clouds once obscuring the view of the stars cleared out, revealing different stars and a full moon.

"Thompson, look into the telescope and tell me what you see." Aiming the telescope, he peered into the glass, responding with a quick

"Bunny."

"Pardon?"

"Yeah, a bunny! Aww, it's so cute!" noticing my confusion, he stepped back for me to look in. Sure enough, on the moon, there was a small, puffy rabbit. White fur, red eyes, and a little cotton ball tail.

"What in the world-" I began to think until I was cut off by the three loud knocks from the door. The coordinator. A tall, well-built man with a well-trimmed beard, grayed with time.

"I'd say you're here right on time. Gather me a team of Plorians as soon as possible." I said, the words spewing out of my mouth.

"Calm down professor. Tell me what's going on first."

"On the moon! There were rabbits, no, a rabbit! It must be some kind of new species because there's no way it could've gotten there from Earth!"

Without a word, the coordinator spun around and left. No life had been discovered on the moon since the Plorians 300 years ago so this could be a completely undocumented species. Needless to say, I was excited. In a matter of minutes, the man returned, with a group of people behind him. They were similar to humans, just they had wings, which seemed to be made of some gaseous material.

The Plorians were a resilient species, who could survive many millennia without eating or drinking. Unfortunately, the gravity on the Earth was too great for them to be able to live independently. The ones who came to Earth in search of new technologies and job opportunities were cared for by astrologists and astronomers in return for services like guiding moon tours or handy work around the facilities.

Scribbling out a rune, I watched as the Plorians stepped into the center, vanishing into a flash of light. Nothing was left but a deep blue phantom light where they once were. After a few minutes, they returned, the one in the center holding our target: the rabbit. For all I knew, it looked like an average bunny. Soft white fur, vibrant red eyes, and floppy ears. No time was wasted. Hurrying to pick it up, I softly placed it on the table and began to collect samples.

Throughout the process, it was shockingly relaxed, even falling asleep at some point. Wrapping up my work, I let it nap as I carried the samples towards the analysis lab. After dropping them off, began the hardest part of the ordeal. Waiting around. It was late enough at this point, so I had no other choice but to pack up and return home. Stepping out, the sun had begun to rise again, somehow hitting my face perfectly and resulting in an instant reaction of squinting and whipping my head around. It had been too long since I'd had a chance to enjoy the sun, to feel the warm embrace of its golden rays.

Returning home, I could hardly sleep. The excitement of last night still lingered and my building anticipation had gotten the better of me. Despite my struggle, I succumbed to the lure of sleep and before I realized it, woke up to the sound of my alarm. My father was already getting ready to go to sleep, so I gave him a brief goodbye and sped out. Prying open the door, I was met with a beaming face holding the moon bunny.

"Guess what?" shouted Thompson

"What is it? What did the analysis say?"

"He's just a bunny."

I was floored. Never mind the fact I was too excited to sleep, how did a rabbit even get to the moon? Rushing towards the lab, I needed answers. What had happened? The little bunny couldn't have gotten on the moon without human intervention. As I swung open the door I saw a thin man with long black hair, tied into a thin ponytail. Recognizing the lead researcher, I began to open my mouth but he stopped me.

"I know why you're here. The rabbit just had an oxygen spell cast on it and someone somehow connected their rune to our moon rune, sending it there. Keep the rabbit or give it to someone else. It doesn't matter, just keep it alive and away from here."

"Ah."

Somehow I couldn't help but feel underwhelmed. Either way, I had no choice but to take the rabbit as there was no way Thompson could keep one alive. This I knew after he killed a succulent in just three days. I did know someone who could though. After wrapping up my work, I left with the rabbit in a carrier with a plan for it. Arriving home, I gingerly scooped up the tiny creature and placed it on the counter. I could feel its heart beating against its chest and I was sure.

As my dad walked down the stairs I knew it was perfect. His face had lit up and the rabbit sniffed the air curiously. Without words, he picked up the little thing tenderly as though it was made of glass and for a few seconds, just admired it.

"Guess where we found it."

"The moon."

Student Name: Serena Li
Grade: 10
School: Bellaire High School
Title: Strangers Again
Category: Short Story
Key: Silver Key
Educator:

"A diamond? That's it? Surely that sort of mission is far below my level," a man complains.

"Yes, agent, but it's very important, and we need to make sure absolutely nothing goes wrong, sir."

"Well, I guess it'll be like a vacation for me," he supposes.

"Don't we have other agents to take missions like this? Stealing a diamond is much too easy for me," a woman's voice sounds from within the room.

"I know, but we received orders to send you specifically, miss. The diamond is really important. Just think of it as a little break, okay?"

"Alright, if you say so." Turning on her heel, the woman walks out of the room.

The wind blows as the sun sets, and the ship chugs along. All around them, couples, families, and friends talk and laugh. Leaning against the railing, a man and woman stand next to each other, looking out over the ocean, each grasping a flute of champagne. The man turns to face her, with a smile on his face.

"Good evening, stranger," he says.

"And who might you be?"

"Your secret admirer."

"You're hilarious," she deadpans.

"I'm not laughing, am I?"

"Y'know, it's nice to meet someone like you, especially in a place like this," the man mused.

"What's that supposed to mean?"

"I mean, you just stand out to me even among all these people. I don't know what it is."

"Well, I'll take that as a compliment then," she replied.

"Of course it's a compliment! I like you."

"You're not being very subtle," she commented.

"I'm not trying to be."

After retiring to his room, the man pulls out a phone and dials a number. He murmurs quietly into it.

"I've got eyes on the diamond, but I can't get to it, at least not right now. Give me a little more time and I'll find a way," the agent reported into his phone.

"We don't have a little more time. This shouldn't be so hard for you, agent. It's the easiest mission you've done."

"I know, okay? There's always guards everywhere and I can't act because people are always looking. I'll get it done, don't worry."

"Well, you better. You know how important this is."

"Yes, yes. I get it," he replied, hanging up with a click.

Two floors above, the woman closes the door of her room behind her, pulling out a phone. Punching in a number, she listens to it ring once, then twice.

"Any updates," a tinny voice asks through the phone.

"Yes. I've found the diamond, but it's too well guarded. Our information was wrong. It'll be much harder for me to get to it now," she gripes.

"It shouldn't be a problem for you though, agent. You can still do it, right?"

"Yeah, I know. I can still get it, of course."

"Good." The call ends with a click.

Once again, the two find themselves at the same spot on the deck. In the early morning, the usual crowd of families is nowhere to be seen and the sound of waves crashing against the hull fills the air. It feels like they are the only ones in the world.

"We meet again, stranger," she says. A pause.

"Y'know, this view is really pretty."

"Of course it is, we're in the middle of the ocean. You wouldn't expect any less," she replies sarcastically.

"Well, I was just making a comment. No need to be so negative, y'know."

"Fine, fine. It's not my fault you say useless things.

"Just humor me, will you," he said with a chuckle. "And I wasn't talking about the ocean."

"Then I suppose I could say the same. The view is quite nice."

"And you said I wasn't subtle."

"I'm giving you my heart, alright? Take care of it."

In the dead of the night, long after the other passengers are asleep, a shadowy figure slips through the halls. The man crouches down as he approaches the security room. Glancing around to make sure no one was around, he moves to press his ear against the door.

'Two people in there', he thinks to himself. 'I can take care of them.'

With that, he pulls out a thin wire and begins to pick the lock, taking care to not make a sound. Having done this a million times before, it barely takes him a minute. With a quiet click, the lock gives and he pockets the wire. Looking behind him one last time, the agent silently pushes open the door. Inside, two guards sit facing away from the door. Immersed in their conversation, they have not noticed the third presence in the room yet.

Footsteps hardly making a sound, the agent approaches the guard sitting on the left. Before either of them notice him, he slams the grip of his gun into the back of his head. With a choked grunt, the guard slumps forward, out cold. The other one jumps up and whips around, pulling out his gun. But before he can do anything, the man grabs him by the throat, yanking him forward. With his other hand, he grabs the hand holding the gun, twisting it so the gun drops to the ground. Soon, the guard passes out from lack of oxygen.

After taking their key cards, he leaves the two slumped on the ground. He spots a metal door on the other side of the room, behind which sits his prize. Quickly, he checks the screens displaying the view from cameras all over the cruise to make sure no one is coming. Walking over to the door, he scans the guard's key card and is very surprised when it beeps and flashes green. He's in.

Gently pushing the door open, he peers through a slight crack. Inside is a dimly lit room. A table sits in the center of the room. His diamond lies on top of the table. And a black-clad figure stands over the diamond, reaching out to grab it.

The gap in the door lets in a slip of light, and when the mysterious figure notices, they snatch the diamond and whip around to face the door. In a heartbeat, both have their guns out, pointed at each other.

"Put the diamond down, now. Even if you shoot me, my backup will be here any minute." The man warns.

"You're bluffing. You don't have backup on a boat in the middle of nowhere." A woman's voice rings out.

“Shoot me, and we’ll see who’s right.”

“I just migh-”

Before she can finish her sentence, the man throws a small disk into the space between them. With a bang and a flash, smoke erupts and quickly fills the whole room. Taking advantage of the distraction, he leaps across the room, tackling the woman to the ground. They wrestle for each other's guns, rolling around on the ground. In the tussle, they both lose grip of their guns. Amidst the fight, she tears the man’s mask off by accident. As his face is revealed, shock flashes across her face.

She shoves him off, leaping to stand up.

“It can’t be. Why are you here? What are you doing here? Is this a joke?” She questions him furiously.

“I don’t understand. Do I know you? I don’t believe we’ve met before.”

“You idiot!” She rips off her mask. “Do you see now? I’ll ask you one more time. What are you doing here?”

“Oh no. Oh, there’s no way. I should be asking you that. Why are you here?”

“You, you’re here for the diamond, aren’t you? Who sent you,” she asks.

“That’s not important! You knew who I was all along, didn’t you? Did you approach me only intending to distract me?”

“God, if I’d known who you were I never would’ve talked to you, much less...”

"Please, don't make me fight you. Just give it to me. I need to have it."

"You think I could give it up so easily? We're here for the exact same thing! What am I supposed to do now?"

The two stare at each other in silence, contemplating their next course of action. This was the last thing they'd expected from the other. Now they had to choose between the mission and the person they'd fallen in love with. Heart or head. It could only be one or the other, never both.

'What are the chances? Out of everyone on this goddamn boat, I had to pick him to fall in love with', she thinks to herself.

'The boat docks very soon, and I need to have the diamond when I leave. But what do I do now? Can I get it from her?'

'God, just yesterday we were dancing and talking without a care in the world. Why did everything go wrong?'

"Would you possibly care to dance with me, stranger?"

"Well, I suppose I could spare you a few minutes." She smiles.

"Alright, then."

They spent the night draped over each other, twirling and spinning across the dance floor. They laughed, danced, and fell deeper into the other's trap of love. That night, both of them forgot about their mission, the reason they were each there in the first place. By the time they returned to their rooms, neither cared to look for the diamond anymore, pushing their problems to the next day.

Less than twenty-four hours had passed since then, and somehow, everything had gone so wrong.

'I have to get the diamond from her while she's distracted. Agents always put the mission before their feelings. If I lose the diamond, it'll be over. I can't let this mistake ruin my mission', he thinks.

'We could run away together. Leave the diamond, leave the organization, leave this whole life behind. It would all work out. We could change our names, move far away, and spend the rest of our lives together.'

They'd made their decisions. They could only hope the other picked the same.

Looking up, they both open their mouths to speak at the same time.

"I won't give up on this mission."

"I'll give up on the mission."

Silence. Silence as they each process the other's choice.

She is heartbroken. She loved him so much, so so much. Too much, she supposed. A little part of her had known it was unrealistic for him to abandon everything for a stranger he'd just met, but she'd been willing to do it, so he would be too, right? Guess not.

'Oh god. Oh my god. I should've known. Of course he'd never pick me over his entire career.'

He is shocked. Never in his life would he have expected her to be willing to give up her whole life. But he couldn't. He'd worked so hard, spent so long, given up everything to get to where he was now. He loved her, but not enough, not as much as she did.

'Oh god. I didn't know she would choose me over everything. I can't do the same for her. I can't give this up.'

"I... I'm sorry. I really am. But I can't do that. This means too much to me. I'm sorry," he apologizes.

"Do I really matter so little to you? Really? Fine, then. I'll take it since it means so much to you."

"Don't be like that, please. I need it more than you do, okay? Just give it to me!"

"Stop talking! I don't want to hear your voice anymore, okay? I wish I'd never met you at all! You've ruined everything!"

She takes a deep breath as if steeling herself for a big decision. Before he can react, she has her gun out, aimed right at his head.

"I should've known better than to believe you loved me as much as I did. This is what you wanted, isn't it? You wanted a fight? I'm giving it to you. Call me childish, but I will have the last word in this battle of love."

"You can't do it. You won't. You said you loved me," he pleads.

"Are you really so stupid to think I would let myself fall for your tricks a second time? I'm over it! You thought you could fool me so easily, and it has cost you your life, you hear me? You've lost, okay?"

“Don’t do this, don’t shoot! We can work this out, okay?”

“No! We cannot! I gave you a chance, and you threw it away! I’ve made my choice, and you will not change my mind!”

He doesn’t respond. What could he possibly say now?

“I’m sorry. This is going to be goodbye, okay?”

“I loved you, and I wanted you to know that. Goodbye, stranger.”

Her finger closes down on the trigger. She closes her eyes.

Bang. The gun fires, the bullet flies, and she hears the thud as it makes contact with flesh. Her arm is jerked back as she is hit with the force of the recoil. She opens her eyes to see his body slumped on the ground, blood already beginning to pool underneath him.

‘I’m sorry. I really am. I’m sorry things had to end this way. I’m so sorry’, she thinks to herself, hoping he can hear her somehow and know that this wasn’t the ending she wanted either.

Knowing she cannot stay here forever, she takes one last glance at the body on the floor, the consequence of her actions. As she blinks tears out of her eyes, she pulls out her phone, dialing a number.

“I got it. I got the diamond.”

“Good. The cruise should dock in four hours. Just hold out a little longer. If anyone finds out, you need to...”

As the man on the other end continues to talk, she tunes him out, closing her eyes and leaning against the wall.

‘I don’t regret talking to you that first day. I don’t regret falling in love with you so quickly. My only regret is that we did not meet in another life.’

Student Name: Ivy Gautam
Grade: 11
School: Carnegie Vanguard High School
Title: Tainted Childhood
Category: Poetry
Key: Silver Key
Educator:

My brother embarked on a journey that no child should bear
The canvas of his innocence was overshadowed by chemotherapies and IVs

His childhood was entangled with the sterile reality of hospital rooms
The songs of childhood became the whirrs and hums of medical machines
The weight of the IV drip became an unsuited companion compared to
The dinosaur-themed backpacks and vibrant lunch kits

He became a victim of the extensive procedures and side effects
Bearing the collision of two distinct worlds
Childhood was once a sanctuary of teeming joy and discovery
Now held the imprint of medical interventions and the pallor of fatigue
The notion of a carefree childhood became a distant dream
Even the taste of favorite childhood treats became a battleground
As nausea waged war against the simple joys of his favorite meals

Amidst the confines, his fleeting laughter remained
Shared stories and whispered dreams became a sanctuary
The spirit of childhood still flowed through him
He continued to laugh and play undefeated despite his physical struggle
He refused to let cancer mentally defeat him

Finally, when the IVs and Chemotherapies had subsided
No more pain and sickness to linger
The playgrounds remained, but the laughter faded
Schoolyards stood, but his footsteps were absent
Suffering had subsided, and he now rests peacefully
In a place beyond the confines of pain

Where he could run freely through the fields
Chasing butterflies, climbing hills, and laying in the soft grass
Bathed in the eternal glow of sunlight
Not the artificial kind of hospital lights
But the sunlight that hugs your skin in a warm embrace

Where he could play in the playground of dreams
Swings swaying with celestial grace
Where time knows no constraints
And any remnants of pain are left behind

Student Name: Fatima Juarez Archundia
Grade: 12
School: DeBakey High School for Health Professions
Title: the astronaut
Category: Poetry
Key: Silver Key
Educator:

he's on a quest
an expedition
in search of something
he cannot describe

space surrounds him,
he has the world
to himself.
who wouldn't believe
he has everything?

he greets the stars,
but he's shy
the vastness seems
to swallow him whole

floating
he's lost in his own mind,
his own memories
he picks one up,
analyzes,

overthinks,
then picks up another
it's a cycle he cannot break.

trace a smile
on his foggy helmet,
why don't you?
it'll cover up the void inside.

he's not a happy astronaut
as I'm sure you've figured out
lonely.
drifting.
afraid.
but had I not told you,
would you have known?

Student Name: Autumn Liu

Grade: 11

School: Carnegie Vanguard High School

Title: The Lamentations of Another Tired Transgender Person

Category: Poetry

Key: Silver Key

Educator: Rachel Bohenic

when i was eight,
i learned in school that
the declaration of independence
is the document that serves
as the foundation for america
where "all men are created equal"
i sang the star-spangled banner every day
proud to be an american,
where i knew i was free

when i was twelve,
i overheard my peers
whispering about a queer girl
in hushed voices
as if "gay" was a curse word
i saw them jeering at her
their sharp tongues digging in
until she began to cry
the day after,
we got an anti-bullying psa over the intercom

that was heckled by the same kids

i didn't see her that day

when i was sixteen, i wondered

what is equality

when half of us want to kill ourselves

when we are refused medical care

for being trans

when our lives are mere tools

used for political gain

when five hundred and eighty-nine bills

condemning our existence

were proposed this year

what is freedom

when our families ostracize us

because we had the sheer audacity to come out to them

when we are christened "faggot" on the streets

for being ourselves

when we are threatened at gunpoint

because we dared open our mouths

Student Name: Karis Chiao

Grade: 11

School: Westside High School

Title: the piano

Category: Poetry

Key: Silver Key

Educator:

A piano rests in this room
accompanied by a soft burgundy bench that
creaks and cries when you sit,
holding memories of musicians young and old
who had come by to bless the keys with their touch.

The notes fall like a soft drizzle upon the floor,
whispering tenderly in the empty corridors
as it patters rhythmically.

These black and white keys know melodies and harmonies
that bleed together into an ombre of colors,
glowing like sun stricken honeycomb
and taste just as sweet.

The lonely piano sings hymns
with a choir of God's mightiest angels,
echoing off the dusty walls that
remain partially plastered in a coat of peeling paint.

And as you wander the pillared halls
a faint hum is heard,
drifting through the hollow lights
that swing from low hanging rafters.

This old, rotting piano

holds a brush in its notes,
painting masterpieces that can only be seen
in the eye of the beholder.
Now, what is this beautiful contrivance doing,
sitting in its lonesome?
Once crafted by the thick and calloused hands
of a wise, forsaken man
who wished for a friend with a magnificence
that surpassed humanity's.
And what a shame it was
to watch his skillful fingers
slip off the keys of his friend
and become silenced from the music it made.
But now,
in the ears of those that listen,
they can hear a distant bellow
of the man's grieving songs.
And ever since then,
the piano has never ceased
to sit and wait in its unquiet quiet,
coaxing the world to feel
to taste
and to see
the elegance of its ivories.

Student Name: Myaan Sonenshein
Grade: 11
School: Kinder High School for the Performing and Visual Arts
Title: Throat*
Category: Poetry
Key: Silver Key
Educator:

overstretched uvula reaching
down my throat, sticky secrets
dangling down my esophagus,
tempting me to swallow my words,
but I'd rather choke them up, hacking
away at the silence; it's never sat
well in my stomach.

(you tell me I talk too loud and
yell too quiet.)

but if you gave me a chance,
I bet I can scream louder.
I can turn my throat raw and red;
claw at the wet flesh coating my larynx,
be a soundbox for desperation and echoes,
filled with a rage, burning and scarring
the soft tissue I hold breath from.

(I don't want to be soft for you anymore)

let me roar, hoarse and
untamed I am, no longer

your white noise machine
 this gentle hum now a screeching cry.
 I'm a girl with a scratched trachea like
 a broken sound record. (a fractured
 story splintering into the empty air)

I'll drip honey
 down my damaged ligaments
 until the protective thyroid cartilage
 is tender from my truth, these words
 no longer fragile from your grip
 around my neck. I promise
 this: (no swirls of audio
 frequency will ever match mine).

*throatnote
 and so when they
 find my soul strangled
 by my vocal cords, body
 vibrating they will know
 I held nothing
 back,
 allowed myself,

 convulsing and pulsing

 deep in my wind pipe
 ,

to scream until

my throat

was dead.

Student Name: Anna Parker

Grade: 11

School: Kinder High School for the Performing and Visual Arts

Title: To the Nice Young Couple Moving Into My Grandad's House on Northwest 25th Street

Category: Personal Essay & Memoir

Key: Silver Key

Educator:

Student Name: Sophia Zhao

Grade: 11

School: Bellaire High School

Title: Uvlan: The Pawn

Category: Flash Fiction

Key: Silver Key

Educator: Kelly Quarles

CHAPTER 1: A PAWN

(Flash Fiction 1)

Blood cascaded down the drain as the thrumming of the water crashing against my back reverberated in the air. Streaks of ruby red painted my legs, and I could feel my mouth turning acetic at the recollection of tonight's events. Forcefully shutting my eyes shut, I shivered as the memories flooded back.

It was two hours after twilight, and the city was nowhere near sleep. Hues of red and roasted butternut filled the skies, and the traffic was still heavy in the clouds. Hot air balloons carried pixie tourists and elves looking for work, the last passengers of the day. Below were the paved roads congested with cars, smoke trickling into the air as honks and angry shouts created a distressing harmony. Soaring skyscrapers seemed to tower infinitely, and there were crowds everywhere—crowds of crooked-eared folk, half-faced fae, and ordinary humans. Crumbling sidewalks winced as I sprinted towards the doors, seconds before they shut, and I was safe inside with the rest of the night passengers. Eerie green bulbs hung over me as they swayed with the wind gushing in from open windows. Stiffly, I kept my eyes trained on the ground, listening intently to the conversation surrounding me, my ears twitching at every vibration. High-pitched voices two seats ahead echo off the metal walls. "Did you hear?? Another body was discovered right at the city center!" "Solas! How much does that make it this moon cycle?" "Too many." The jangle of beads indicated the shaking of heads, and I quickly saw the two. Long silky white hair and pitch-black eyes. Witches. The cause of the uproar that overtook the city was the disturbing find of dozens of bodies scattered across the area. With no suspects announced, everyone was living on tiptoes. Licking my lips in anxiety, I trained my sight on the floor once again. Suddenly, my ears perked in the opposite direction, and my breath hitched, and I almost lost my balance. Footsteps resonated in my head as he walked toward me with a grin so vast it made me quiver. My hands started to shake. Dressed in a sleek suit and a top hat, the Keeper handed me a single slip of paper. Trembling, I reached for it as it fell from his gloved hands. Everyone knows what this slip

of paper means. It means you become a pawn, a player. In a game you can never escape from.

FLASH FICTION 2

Sweat dripped off my cheek, and although my hearing was heightened, all I could hear was the thudding of my heart, quickening its pace. Whipping my head to the left, I felt numb when I realized the witches were gone. I was alone with a Keeper in a train car. With a jolt, the train stops. The hanging green light bulbs began to dim, to pitch black.

My eyes widen with fear at my fate unfolding.

(flash fiction 3)

TITLE: Paper City

As a single raindrop plummets to the awaiting shriveled blades of grass, the lazy red sun peeks sleepily

from the gray horizon. Drip, drip, drip! The shy, hushed whisper of the storm suddenly becomes a

thunderous, ear-splitting howl. Streams of hazy gold sunlight struggle to pierce through the frenzy of the

downpour as flashes of lightning streak across the dreary morning sky. In the far distance, sinister

coal-black towers rise from the earth and reach out toward the mist like the claws of a distressed crow.

From a small window at the very top of a tower, a young girl stares vacantly at the city below. Shafts of

light illuminates her deathly pale and ashen complexion. Her eyes are like dark, bottomless pits that hold

vast amounts of emptiness. Absentmindedly she folds another paper plane, one of the

thousands that lay in crumpled piles surrounding her. Grasping the wrinkled paper creation, she leans out

the window and hurls it toward the sky. Before it begins its descent below, she turns around and locks the

window firmly shut.

Thousands of feet up in the air, the paper plane glides and drifts amongst the clouds. The

once-defending roar of pouring rain slows to a soft, delicate drizzle, then to an abrupt stop. Curls of wispy

smoke streams lazily upwards, and a brown haze hovers over the city that stretches endlessly in every

direction. From high above, it's like a never-ending maze. The highways that go on and on for miles are

twisted messes of metal that are like metallic snakes slithering over and under each other. Colossal

skyscrapers crowd every inch of space and disappear into the murky atmosphere above.

Malicious-looking aircraft hover over dilapidated buildings and soar expeditiously through every nook

and cranny. Suddenly, the wind shifts, and the paper plane plunges thousands of feet below to the very

center of the bustling metropolis. Fluorescent flashes of vivid lights send out signals throughout the

capital, and rays of light stream across the buildings, occasionally irradiating the paper plane.

Immense silence enfolds the crowds of citizens at the Uvlans train station like a thick blanket of

cobwebs. The absolute quiet is almost eerie. There are thousands of people back to back, and yet the drop

of a stone can be heard a mile away. An unnerving feeling of stillness lingers in the halls as the people

wait restlessly. Faces of weariness and distress crowd every corner, and their eyes are

shadowed with bags.

Student Name: Adela Nicolae
Grade: 10
School: Carnegie Vanguard High School
Title: When the Curtain Parts
Category: Poetry
Key: Silver Key
Educator: Max Ostrovsky

The lights fade on
And the set is revealed.
The audience hushes.

Their eyes see as one,
Their hearts beat as one,
Their neurons fire as one,

And they peer into the same kaleidoscope,
Spying a mirror folded between ever-changing colors.

Engulfed,
They gaze intently into this larger-than-life mirror
At shifting silhouettes and a story unlike any preached before;
But they do know it.

It is themselves that they see
Dancing around cones of illumination,
Reaching out close enough to brush their faces;
Close enough to squeeze their pulsating souls.

And I, truly on the stage,
Watch their entrancement,
Follow the crystal tears dripping from their jaws,
Catch the fleeting chuckles escaping from their dim lips.

Together we lay vulnerable.
I open my heart wide to give a story,
And the audience bares their hearts to receive it.

The audience rests patiently,
And allows me to imprint their souls;
Supple blocks of clay I form with nimble fingers.

I fabricate scenes and statues,
Leave fingerprints and scars,
Paint delicate flowers and gashes with ebony inks.

The silence is deafening.
The applause is thundering.

Plumes of emotions shift in the space
As I bow before piercing eyes.

No one leaves unchanged
As I feel their molded souls.

The curtain falls.

Student Name: Joy Xia

Grade: 10

School: Bellaire High School

Title: 团团圆圆

Category: Flash Fiction

Key: Silver Key

Educator: Steffannie Alter

Stepping into the dining room, warm light flooded my senses. The familiar glow radiated over every corner of the house, flowing through the windows and into the cold, deep night. This was how every family dinner began. Five chairs circling the table. Three forks for my siblings and me. Two pairs of chopsticks for my parents. One pot of rice for us all. Every set plate and bowl fit snug to recreate a picturesque memory, like every piece of a perfect puzzle. Time had not eroded the remains of what used to be a daily occurrence.

The only thing that marked evidence of the special occasion was the glittering gift box adorned with golden swirls and clouds that sat to the side of the table unassumingly. Carved auspicious phrases and symbols of the moon and peach blossoms spoke to the contents of the equally ornamented mooncakes delicately placed within the red packaging.

I love mooncakes. The small compact treats were not extravagant, but they were special and always found a way to break into our home in the form of gifts and goodwill from neighbors, just in time for the festival. Mooncakes traditionally symbolize the full moon. Her roundness represented family unity and was embodied in every mooncake; the ridges and dips that made up the intricate designs impressed into the flaky flesh were laced with a delicate nostalgia that could thaw any surrounding unfamiliarity.

But as I sat down in the first empty dining chair, the occasion felt foreign, even as it resonated with a buried part of my memory. I knew not to expect too much. Soon, my dad and brother took their seats. My mom beamed and pointed to the incohesive plates and bowls filled with Chinese dishes that crowded the small table. She must have spent her entire afternoon making them. The dishes were modest— nothing like how the people in China would have been celebrating the Mid-Autumn Festival, nothing like the elaborate dishes we would have spent all day, from morning to evening, making together a few years back.

Had it been any other year before, the natural wood table below my fingertips would be covered in a thin layer of residual flour. Our annual dumpling festivities were knitted into the heart of our home. On every major holiday of every year, the atmosphere would shift, and the pungent scent of fresh chives from our backyard would grow ever more strong. We would mix every batch of sticky filling, knead every imperfect lump of dough, roll out every thin dumpling skin, together. My mom always made the roundest dumplings.

Had it been any other year, we might have tried decorating the house a little. Ruffled paper lanterns would have hung from the ceiling and red Chinese couplets may have been plastered across the walls, ever-so-slightly crooked.

Had it been any other year, the empty chair across from me would have been filled, and perhaps the presence of one last person would have made all the difference between a festive celebration and an awkward effort.

“How was your day?” I asked my brother.

“Good.”

Silence.

Although the day was special, the silence reflected much more than that: months and years of stifled relationships that not even the fullest, brightest moon could reverse. We had not had family dinner in years. It was the same table, the same chairs, the same food, and yet, each of us were different people. I knew that. Yet, I still hoped for something different.

Nothing had changed. Dinner was quiet.

...but maybe that didn't matter right now.

Separation is the prerequisite to any reunion. And maybe that's why I held onto this flickering moment.

We were eating together, just like we did a few years ago before my sister left, before my brother was gone everyday, before my parents' marriage grew thin, and back to the time we still made dumplings together. With each bite, the food we were sharing was slowly mending the cracks. For me, it was enough.

Looking at the table before me now and all the half-eaten dishes and scattered chopsticks, pangs of twisted nostalgia came in waves. My mom had made all my childhood favorites, all the dishes we once ate regularly when we still had family dinners. Every dish was warm.

After everyone finished eating, I was the first to reach for one of the mooncakes set out on the table. As I peeled open the artificial packaging of the mooncake, crumbs spilled onto my lap. I smiled. The round dessert already had pieces broken off the edges. But as I took my first bite, I knew everything about it was perfect. The sweetness tasted like nothing like corn syrup and everything like family reunion.

I knew what I needed to do. In three long strides, I reached the doorway and stepped outside the warmth of my home.

The prickly autumn night rushed to greet me. I paced through my backyard, straining my neck to see through the dense tree branches. I rushed out through the front of my house. Over the front lawn. Across the road. Down the street. I had to find it.

I kept looking up and scanning for any hint of a dim glow, my hope and what was supposed to be the brightest sphere in the sky tonight. But only the deep black sky stared back. The moon had hidden her face from me.

The air was chilling, icy snaps whipped against my fingers and toes. But the howling winds seemed faint against the voices echoing through my head. The night was quiet. The moon was gone. But the stars seemed to shine all the brighter.

Student Name: Willa Abraham

Grade: 10

School: Kingwood High School

Title: Never Felt So

Category: Short Story

Key: Silver Key

Educator: Clifton Pope

My... would you look" I gently spoke, ushering my dear Amaris to take a gander at my sighting. She approached the window I was looking through, peering out beside me whilst rubbing the bump of her stomach. Children, in lines, rows like prisoners- no! No, no... like sheep! Yes... like sheep indeed. Following around their shepherd. Do they fear the shepherd's staff? I don't... No, no- oh how could I? So unformidable, it is, really... yes... yes very puny- Just like the children! Hah! Yes, yes! Those children can not harm me... no- not at all. They can't harm anyone! Only themselves! Oh could you imagine... "What am I looking for?" Amaris interrupted my thoughts.

"My dear, can you not see what I see?" I questioned her "No, I suppose not darling." As she stopped speaking I suddenly blurted, "Puppets!" And proud, I was, of my observation, I continued "Tangled in... strings! That's right- yes... Strings." My dear Amaris peered at me sideways, concerned she appeared... but I carried on, nonetheless. "Yes, yes... Strings. There are no strings on me." I began scratching at my hands, as if something had crawled onto them. " No strings at all, no- none! Haha!" I said, emphasizing each following word a little more than the previous.

My dear Amaris tugged at my arm, I flinched my arm upward in a swatting motion. Amaris had shuddered at my action. No... no it wasn't me that caused her to flinch in such a way- the birds! Yes... yes the birds are at fault not me! My dear shuddered at the sight of the birds flying past. She must have seen a flock! A large flock! Of course I didn't do anything wrong, I- "Darling, how tense you must feel..." She slowly brought her hand to my arm, still in the air, and lowered it. Her soft voice once again impeded my rapid thoughts. "Please sit down darling... you seem off your head." Amaris sat me in a settee parallel to the window sill and began walking towards the kitchen.

Off your head I thought to myself. Off my head? No... no I am not off my head... she is! Because she saw those birds! Why must I take a seat? My dear Amaris needs it more than I! But of course this is a very... comfy seat... yes- a very comfy seat indeed! Those children however... playing games. I don't play games... no not anymore.

My knee began bouncing, my eyes continued peering, peering at those... children. How dare they play games? The sound of a ball bouncing and hitting the floor rapidly was so loud in my ear. I'd never play- "Here you are, darling" I jumped at her interruption. "My,

are you jumpy!" She chuckled and handed me a glass of steamed green tea. She sat beside me, rubbing her bump in a circular motion whilst she placed her hand on my shoulder. "You weren't like this yesterday" she stated. "Did anything happen while you were at the markets, darling?" I quickly jolted my head to meet her eyes, my eyebrows furrowed. How dare she assume that something could have happened to me? I am not jumpy! I began speaking in a very calm notion "No- No nothing happened, my dear." I brought a hand to her hair and tucked it behind her ear. "But those children..." I referred once more, glancing towards the window, squinting my eyes. My heartbeat quickened "What is it darling? Is something wrong with... with the children?" She spoke perplexed by my words.

Of course, she wouldn't understand. Neither do I. The tea in my hand began to spill out of the glass as my hand shook. Amaris took the tea from my hand and placed it on the tea table. "Darling, you should-" I stood up "No! No-I am not off my head, dear!" I spoke as I trembled towards the front door, only to be stopped by pulling at my shirt collar. "Darling!" She raised her voice. She raised her voice. Like I- I...was a misbehaving... Child! I am not one of those... varmints! I began to chuckle at my own thoughts. "Yes... yes they are varmints..." I whispered, not realizing I had spoken out loud. I swung around to my dear and met her worrying eyes. "Darling... are you feeling well?" Oh, how that question offends me greatly.

"My dear, must we live across that school ground any longer?" My voice began to raise. "Oh- Just-" Words spat out of my mouth "the sounds of those children disease me!" I exclaimed passionately. Amaris looked up at me with great sadness. "But darling... we will have a child to send to that very school not far from now" her tears were forming quicker than my thoughts could arrive. "Are you... not wanting this anymore?" She placed one hand on her stomach and looked down with great sorrow. "Amaris... no my dear that is not what- what I mean- I just..." I sighed in frustration. "I don't know what I mean dear." I took her into my arms apologetically. My dear is crying, is it my fault? No it- can't be, I mean-That. Noise. Is she hearing it too?The children are throwing balls around so loudly. I Suddenly I feel so hungry... so, so hungry. "How about you go to bed my dear" I told her. "Go to bed and I will clean up for you"

Shortly after she had fallen to a midday nap I stuck true to my word. Cleaning up the kitchen as any adult would do. I am an adult, not a child... no not at all. Why would one ever consider a man like me a child?

After finishing up the cleaning (Very quickly of course, since I am faster than any child could ever be, as I am an adult) I felt a temptation. An appetite, one may call it. A very... disastrous appetite. I didn't want the fruits nor the bread... no nothing like that. Something specific. Something... oddly daring. I took my coat off the rack and oh so cautiously opened the front door... you would be impressed with just how wary I was as I left the house. All in order to not disturb my dear's slumber. Would a child be as careful as I?

Sneakily I was... walking towards the school grounds where the children play. The deadly appetite grew stronger every step I took. The sounds of the children playing with a sort of ball was pounding louder as if they were throwing it at my head. And oh- how my anger grew as well!

Along the edges of the playgrounds a lone child was there. All alone... the instructors appeared to pay no attention... How childish. Not every adult is truly an adult at mind I suppose! The child was a very young boy... maybe 5 years old. He entertained his small brain with sticks, almost the same color as his hair. I approached the boy, I'm sure he, innocent as a child is expected to be, would pay no thought in telling an instructor his story about how a man had approached him.

"Hello, boy" I spoke and the boy spun around, his cheeks red from the cold. "Hello sir!" He then lifted his stick to show me "wanna play with me?" Sticks. There is no such game. He just wants to hit things with it. How brainless! "What is your name?" I asked, ignoring his foolish question "Vince! After my uncle Vince!" He stated proudly. "I'll play sticks with you." A weird feeling in my chest began. The sound of the children throwing balls around grew louder and louder. "Come with me, we can play in my yard. You won't be alone anymore." I told Vince assuringly. "Really mister?" He asked happily "I won't be alone anymore!" He stated, a big smile across his face revealing his front being only half grown in. He began skipping around me in circles. But I care not for his moment of joy but for my moment of relief, once my appetite is treated. I grabbed his forearm quickly "Lets get on with it then, i have no more time for you to make noise!" I started pulling him towards my house, off the school grounds and not a single instructor noticed. How ignorant.

"I'm so happy sir! Not a thing in the world could make me happier right now!" He continued to skip forward as I walked. Such a simpleminded creature he seems to be... entertained by sticks and overly-joyful when a single person agrees to play his moronic games. Typical child behavior. So gullible but i- i am not! No... not gullible like a child is. I show you... just how much better I am than a child, I swear! This boy... Vince! I will make an example! My hunger to prove myself powerful has grown too far now... why i've never felt such a way before! Should I make more examples for you to know of? Soon the school grounds will know just how... HalfWitted those children are! And not just the school grounds... the village- the town- the city! My dear... Amaris. They will all know that I am no child... this! Little Vince! I Am a child! Yes... yes a child indeed he is. Ha! Haha!

I told myself I would halt committing this, when I committed to giving a new life to my dearest Amaris. Now, I must fear what I may do in 2 months, when our family grows a bijou, and my appetite grows a plentitude. No longer will a sight of innocence make me bat a lash for my actions. There is such an abundance of piquancy, it outweighs my guilt. I feel knowing that his family, if he should have one, will be dismayed.

Though this boy has no fear at this time, he will soon. A childish fear, one that believes that there is still a light in me to spare his but for now and ever, it will remain obscure.

Student Name: Nolan Yee

Grade: 11

School: James E Taylor High School

Title: A Comprehensive Solution to the Great Barrier Reefs Ecosystemic Degradation

Category: Critical Essay

Key: Silver Key

Educator:

Across scientific research or global news, Earth's degrading environment is no novel issue. Despite awareness raised toward climate change or pollution, the worsening of these problems far outpaces relief efforts. Worse, the extent to which these problems affect the global population is drastic. Urban areas across the globe face significant changes when adapting to new anthropogenic impacts (Bender, 2022), while smaller, isolated communities in diverse environments face risks of natural disasters due to the human-induced effects on the climate (Watson, 2020). The significance of the overwhelming issue of anthropogenic environmental degradation is amplified by its far-reaching effects on both urbanized cities and isolated communities.

Considering the Earth's critical state, it becomes essential to analyze the specific ecosystems being affected to address their issues adequately. One of these most frequently researched ecosystems is the Great Barrier Reef (GBR), which, despite being one of the world's seven natural wonders, faces severe problems due to the Earth's overwhelming anthropogenic environmental decline. Don Hinrichsen (1997), an environmental journalist, highlights the overarching predicament that the GBR faces in the journal *Bioscience*, noting that human impacts such as pollution from settlements and careless fishing practices have caused ecosystemic deterioration. Environmental researchers Sophie Lewis and Jennie Mallela (2018) from The Australian National University corroborate this idea, describing how human-induced climate change and water quality issues significantly contributed to the mass death of GBR corals in 2016. Overall, human impacts on the GBR have damaged it extensively, propelling the need for a solution addressing them to preserve the GBR's ecosystem.

However, developing a solution is a challenging task. Various solutions, such as ecotourism or 3D-printed corals, have been proposed but never implemented widely due to limitations. Despite these efforts, the GBR continues to face its problems, compelling the need for a comprehensive solution. Thus, the question arises: what should be done to most effectively address the human-induced ecosystemic degradation of the Great Barrier Reef (GBR)? Through a comprehensive solution to its decline, the GBR may preserve its beauty as a natural wonder of the world.

Issues to Address

To develop a comprehensive solution to the GBR's environmental decay, the problems involved must be identified. While the GBR's ecosystemic degradation is primarily anthropogenic, as noted above, the two specific causes noted by researchers and journalists alike are human unawareness and climate change. To further understand the complexity of the decline of the GBR, these contributing factors must be analyzed thoroughly to develop solutions addressing them effectively.

Don Hinrichsen (1997) discusses human unawareness towards preserving the GBR, illustrating how apathy has led to devastating practices like fishing for exotic fish using poisons or explosives along with irresponsible waste disposal, ultimately harming the health of the reefs and its wildlife. With this apparent lack of sensitivity, careless human action is deadly to reefs and must be mitigated to minimize its adverse effects on reef populations. However, it is essential to note the changes made to raise awareness for coral reefs, especially over the 26 years since the publishing of Hinrichsen's paper. Through political action taken towards GBR conservation, such as a 1 billion dollar plan announced by Scott Morrison, former Prime Minister of Australia, personal and political awareness about the GBR's problems has vastly increased (Grattan, 2022). However, despite the recent rise in awareness, action can still be taken toward reducing the irresponsible anthropogenic impact on the GBR.

The more popularly proposed cause of the GBR's decline is climate change. According to a survey by Statista (2017), the overwhelming majority of Australian residents believe the largest threat to the GBR is climate change, with 44% of respondents, with the second largest factor, mining activities, receiving only 23%. Supporting this idea, Lisa Walpole and Wade Hadwen (2022) claim climate change is widely acknowledged to be the most significant contributor to the GBR's decline and has been vastly amplified with the recent mass bleaching events in 2016, 2017, and 2020.

Rising global temperatures cause corals to expel their symbiotic partners, algae called zooxanthellae, due to stress on their environment; as the temperature remains high, the zooxanthellae remain expelled, eventually killing the coral (National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration, 2023). Coral bleaching significantly affects the ecosystem: according to Rick Stuart-Smith et al. (2018), ecology researchers from the University of Tasmania, the lack of coral cover following mass bleaching in 2016 led to declines in reef fish and invertebrate populations. Additionally, the high temperatures associated with coral bleaching caused large-scale trophic restructuring where the biodiversity of fish populations declined (Stuart-Smith et al., 2018). It is also important to note that this study took place only two years after the 2016 bleaching, and as global temperatures continue to rise, more drastic ecosystemic changes may occur.

While they do not oppose each other, the two issues of human unawareness and climate change complicate the development of a comprehensive solution to the GBR's decline. Previously proposed solutions focus on one or the other with no integration. While these solutions may effectively address their respective problems, the lack of integration

inhibits their ability to solve the entire problem. For example, campaigns and informative programs may raise funds and awareness, but the issue of climate change is not addressed. Similarly, if reef resistance to climate change is increased without addressing awareness, the GBR will remain vulnerable to other anthropogenic impacts like pollution or damaging tourism.

Ultimately, an effective solution to the overall problem must incorporate considerations for human awareness and climate change.

Current Solutions

Having identified the primary issues threatening the GBR, it becomes critical to analyze current solutions and whether they address them sufficiently, propelling the development of a more comprehensive solution by analyzing specific solutions. While these solutions are not perfect in their application, they offer insight into combining positive implications and resolving limitations.

3D-Printed Corals

One such solution is the implementation of 3D-printed coral structures within reefs to restore the habitat structure of the ecosystem. David Klinges (2018), an environmental journalist for the ecology magazine *Mongabay*, supports this solution, noting the adaptability of 3D-printed coral structures towards intended environments and their role as lifelike artificial habitat replacements for reef animal populations. Corroborating this idea, Natalie Levy et al. (2022), reef researchers published in the peer-reviewed journal *Science of Total Environment*, highlight how the scalability and sustainability of 3D-printed reef models allow them to function effectively as a solution for reef restoration. Overall, 3D-printed reefs effectively address climate-change-induced coral bleaching by protecting the structure of reef ecosystems through artificial corals resistant to rising temperatures, thereby preserving reef populations. However, despite the observable benefits of these models, various limitations currently restrict their widespread use and effectiveness as a comprehensive solution.

While Hamed Albalawi et al. (2021) do not directly contradict Levy et al.'s claims, they find that while 3D-printed models themselves are scalable, the processes for printing them are costly, as they require printers with higher working capacities, new sustainable materials to print with as not to damage the ecosystem, and large teams of experts to incorporate these models into the GBR. Klinges (2018) substantiates this claim, noting potential risks regarding the materials and methods of installation for 3D-printed reefs that may harm the GBR instead of helping it.

Additionally, despite this solution's adequate approach to managing the effects of climate change and coral bleaching, it fails to address the equally prominent issue of human awareness. As previously mentioned, a comprehensive solution to the GBR's ecosystemic state requires the consideration of both human awareness and climate change to

successfully limit the various impacts associated with each. Despite this, 3D-printed corals still establish a strong foundation for a comprehensive solution as it would substantially benefit the GBR's problems associated with climate change.

Ecotourism

Another more controversial solution to the GBR's ecosystemic issues is ecotourism, or the encouraged tourism of endangered areas to promote conservation efforts through funding and awareness. While some argue that introducing more humans into an ecosystem damaged by humans is counterintuitive, Eric Bender (2022) notes in an article published in Knowable magazine that humans are an integrated part of environments such as urban areas and encourages their consideration when evaluating the state of the ecosystem. Bender's article helps to rationalize the consideration of ecotourism as a solution, despite its surface-level controversy.

Ecotourism aims to establish a positive feedback loop between tourism and conservation efforts, generating revenue to expand the industry while raising awareness for efforts (Stronza, 2019). According to Tree Meinch (2023), an environmental journalist for the magazine Discover, ecotourism benefits the GBR by promoting increased funding and awareness, with over \$11 million raised at the beginning of 2020 to support conservation efforts. Meinch also notes that, according to the Australian Institute of Marine Science, regulated tourism significantly contributes to reef conservation efforts (Meinch, 2023). Ecotourism is effective in generating revenue and supporting conservation efforts while raising awareness by promoting the preservation of endangered areas. However, significant limitations regarding ecotourism inhibit its use as a comprehensive solution.

Harsuko Riniwati, a Professor at the University of Brawijaya in Indonesia, et al. (2019) contradict Meinch's claims, asserting that ecotourism negatively affects coral reef environments through the unfacilitated interactions between tourists and corals in diving, where tourists often damage the ecosystem. By leaving coral safety up to irresponsible tourists and inadequate regulation, ecotourism may pose a potential danger to reef safety. The Great Barrier Reef Foundation (2022) supports Riniwati's claims, noting that the carrying capacity of tourism sites has been exceeded and therefore caused damage to corals and wildlife, along with adverse impacts on cultural and community values in local areas. Riniwati and the Great Barrier Reef Foundation substantiate the limitations behind ecotourism, underscoring its flawed application as a solution to the decline of the GBR.

However, William Heyman et al. (2010), coastal and marine geography researchers at Texas A&M University, contradict these limitations: they instead note that the proportion of inexperienced or untrained divers who aggravate reef fish populations is relatively small in comparison to the much more considerable amount of divers participating in properly trained diving. Thus, while small groups may harm ecosystem health, their impact is less substantial than thought.

Ultimately, ecotourism is by no means a perfect solution to the environmental decay of the GBR; however, it is essential to note the considerations drawn from its various implications and limitations. Ecotourism is highly successful at generating funds and awareness for conservation efforts and can thus be applied to the GBR in order to promote its preservation and raise money to support organizations working towards saving the reefs. These funds can also power expensive conservation practices limited by their costs. However, ecotourism needs to address the equally important issue of climate change that threatens the GBR to reach its full potential as a solution.

An Integrated Solution: Ecotourism-Funded 3D-Printed Reefs

Considering the significant issues threatening the GBR along with the implications and limitations of 3D-printing reefs and ecotourism, necessary factors to address in a comprehensive solution to the GBR's environmental decay have been identified, and a complete solution may now be presented. This comprehensive solution integrates ecotourism and 3D-printing reefs in order to account for the limitations of one another.

While individually, ecotourism and 3D-printing reefs have been largely unsuccessful as comprehensive solutions due to their various limitations, together, they support each other and allow a near-seamless integration to address both problems that the GBR faces effectively. For example, as aforementioned, 3D-printed reef models, limited by their costs due to the need for innovative sustainable materials, are funded by the revenue raised by ecotourism; additionally, the awareness raised by ecotourism helps mitigate anthropogenic impacts on the environment by encouraging conscious and considerate environmental decisions. Similarly, ecotourism's inability to address environmental issues is solved through the environmental resistance and adaptability of the 3D-printed coral models. The integration of the two solutions not only fosters the benefits of both, such as raising funds and protecting habitat structures, but also covers their individual limitations by addressing both noted issues: human awareness and climate change.

Conclusion

If implemented correctly, the integrated utilization of ecotourism to fund 3D-printed reef models would serve as a significant step forward in addressing the GBR's continued environmental decline. Through this solution, reef ecosystems would be safer against climate change through the structural addition of adaptable and sustainable 3D-printed models, funded by enthusiastic tourists who would benefit conservation efforts through fees and awareness towards making more sustainable personal choices for the environment.

However, this solution still needs revision regarding the enactment of its implementation. Without the proper groups to enforce the solution's regulation or organize consistent efforts to promote awareness or install 3D models, the solution would fail. Nonetheless, support from both government officials and smaller nonprofit groups offers insight into the successful implementation of this solution. While the integrated solution may seem

unfeasible to implement successfully across the various governmental and nonprofit organizations involved in GBR conservation, encouraged partnership between the government and smaller-scale, sustainable organizations would allow this comprehensive solution to be diffused hierarchically, propelling conservation efforts across the GBR.

While ecotourism-funded 3D printing is not a perfect solution and still requires research on its potential application, its implications for reef health and the mitigation of anthropogenic impacts make it a significant part of preserving and restoring the natural beauty of the GBR.

Student Name: Maria Gabriella Noca

Grade: 11

School: Cinco Ranch High School

Title: A Joyless Existence

Category: Short Story

Key: Silver Key

Educator: Mary Sarver

Your sister is dead.

Your sister is dead.

Your sister is dead.

I repeat the words in my head, over and over. Accentuating the different syllables, and letters- trying to understand the meaning of them as they bounce around in my brain.

For a college graduate with a newly acquired masters degree you'd think I'd have an easy time absorbing something so simple. And yet the words still clash against my brain stems, refusing to settle.

She was in a car. She was coming home.

Someone else was in another car. A stranger. A drunk stranger. No one knows where they were going and no one ever will.

Their paths collided and now she is dead. They both are. Dead. Dead. dead.

As in not alive. As in Lifeless.

I cringe as the thought of that passes through my head. My sister, Joy Adaolisa Reza, and the word lifeless do not belong on the same planet much less in the same sentence. And yet.

The phone rings, snapping me out of my thoughts. It's my mother again, probably calling to confirm that I've gotten tickets to come home for the funeral. I haven't. My hand shakes as I pick up the phone, "Hi, Mama. How are you?"

"Barka da safiya, Rahab. Ina lafiya." Good Morning rahab. I'm fine. My mother only ever speaks in her mother tongue. Or rather her second language- her first was stolen from her a long time ago.

She also insists on only calling me Rahab, the name she chose for me. She chose all of our middle names, our father laying claim to the firsts. I sigh and shake my head as I thank the good Lord that my father had the sense to overrule her and name me Ruth. My mother is the only person in the world who would think it is better to be named after a holy prostitute than a young widow.

Another sigh forces itself out when her words register in my mind. Ina lafiya- I am fine. My mother is a liar. The tremor in her voice is enough to reveal how distressed she is. It might be in her nature to be gentle and timid but my mother, the woman that she is, is never scared. Never in front of me at least.

"Har yanzu kuna cikin jihohi? Yaushe zaku dawo?" Are you still in the states? When will you be back?

"I can't come back until the 14th, Mama. You know this."

"ko kun sami tikitin ku?" Have you at least gotten your ticket?

"Yes", I lie. But in reality I haven't been able to move since I received my Fathers voicemail carrying the bad news.

“An yi hatsari da safiyar yau; Murna ta fita tare da wasu kawayenta a hanyarta ta dawowa ta ci karo da direban bugu. Sun yi karo kuma ta mutu a kan tasiri, kamar yadda direban ya yi. Ina sa ran ku gida da zaran kun gama hirarku da Weaver and White;” He had said.

“There was an accident this morning; Joy went out with some friends and on her way back she encountered a drunk driver. They collided and she died on impact, as did the driver. I expect you home as soon as you finish your interview with Weaver and White.” I remember his exact words. They were the same ones I’d been processing for the past two hours.

“I’m sorry, Mama, I have to go. There’s some Post LSAT studying I have to do.” Another lie but it wasn’t as if she was able to understand what I was talking about anyways.

“Oah, kawai ku tuna ku sake kirana. Iyali yana da mahimmanci, Rahab. Musamman yanzu tare da farin ciki kasancewa-”

Just remember to call me again, Rahab. Family is important.

Especially now with joy being g-

“Yes, Yes, Of course. I’ll call you, I love you, good bye;” I say interrupting her before she can finish her sentence.

Before I have to accept that she’s not just calling me to remind me to visit for the umpteenth time because family is important and to ramble on about how I’ve become so, so different since I started my studies in the states.

She called because Ruth is gone. I know that, I even somewhat understand it. My father told me more than clearly enough. His words were straightforward and concise to the point of brutality even. But hearing them from her would make them real. Hearing my mother admit that her baby was dead, would mean I’d have to admit my sister was too.

And while the words were no longer violently echoing through my head, they had settled quite nicely in the pit of my stomach.

Their new form as a dense boulder felt heavy and destructive but at least they were contained within me.

As long as they were there, I couldn't open my mouth and risk letting them loose. Just because they existed in my reality didn't mean they'd have to exist in anyone else's too. Not in this country at least.

In Nigeria, Joy was a beautiful soul gone too soon. A carcass with a waiting casket. Someone who will be spoken about in the past tense for the rest of history. But here, in the country my mother despised, in the country my trepid heart found solace in after my father's second affair, she was the sister I'd tell classmates about when they asked about the pictures on my screen savers, the mother who brought her new born children to Disneyland even though they were in capable of creating memory, the daughter that had convinced my mom to visit me for the first time after I'd left home.

Once I bought the ticket home though, once I emailed my (hopefully) future employers that I would need my first few weeks off so I could fly across entire worlds just to land and fill the dirty ground with holy flesh, then she would be dead here too. She would never again pose for a screen saver worthy selfie, she would never again take her children on another trip, and my mother would never again lay another foot out of the land my sister grew up in.

Student Name: Chutong Zhang

Grade: 10

School: Jordan High School

Title: A Poet's Oath

Category: Poetry

Key: Silver Key

Educator:

A gust of freedom is blowing across
the meadow of galloping horses and long roads
In the spring of burgeoning green
are the green blankets of mountains in drizzle
the faraway you have painted?

There is a pipe dream under mountain trees
of interwoven light and shadow
The sun and the moon shining bright,
is the starry sky the tears you shed?

In the disturbing noise do the red bricks of Beijing
still get a dotting love of wild grass?
In the sudden silence,
do your poems abound with swarming clouds?

Bustling and crazy,
will you still walk into the wind you once loved?
The wavering silvery hair
is covered with layers of hidden frost

Desolate and mundane,
will you still be terrified by the falling leaves
of the trees you wept for?
What to look for upon return?
You will see the budding green on the twigs

Had I been free and not hesitant—
I wish all sufferings float away like clouds above the travelers
Had I felt pain and lost—
I'd like to be buried in the world.

Student Name: Rayhan Roy

Grade: 11

School: Seven Lakes High School

Title: Aber Ich Lebe

Category: Poetry

Key: Silver Key

Educator:

Solipsistic gazes burned the boiling pot,
surrounded by cruel soldier, and crueler men,
Arbeit macht frei, the musselman hungered for freedom,
destined not for an allied land, but liberty's den,
I raved as the strong stole and discarded the weak,
But we men, ravenously biting burnt bread, were the weakest of all,

Only I exist, Only I matter, no thought given to once beheld brothers,
a primitive savageness, to our oppressor's delight,
marked every dissolute step with baleful might,
Startlingly, a child's wail struck with sonderous thunder,
clutching gruel over his emaciated father,
That night, the food tasted like dead bodies,

Burning, the smoke of his conviction smelled of humanity,
and while destitute minds intertwine with wintry rationality,
hope weaves a fragile blanket with hands of strong veins and thick blood,
It was scorned by midday; ripped, tattered, shredded,
glazed, defiant eyes patented the boy's face,
I shoveled my emotions into that furnace,
frigid and lightless as Abaddon,

Day lapses to night, stars twinkle, greeting dim, constricted pupils,
I forsook food, a more dignified end than one given by the Angel of Death,
God would see pallid, gaunt hands indulging the unbroken,
benevolence that he hazarded to endow,

They marched, the red tide would not spare them, leaving the starved behind,
It was dark, an unnatural darkness unbecoming of dawn,
I was among the dead, but above me stood a crimson star,
Dilating, my heart cried as salty dew fell from the soldier's face,

I woke in heaven, cleansed of grime, and sunlight jewelizing my bed,
broken, despaired, crystallized in sorrow,

Aber ich lebe

—Rayhan Roy

Student Name: Charlotte Primrose

Grade: 11

School: Jordan High School

Title: adam and eve

Category: Poetry

Key: Silver Key

Educator:

the first time i was aware i was a girl was in first grade

sister seaton asked the class about how God created Eve

i assumed that like Adam, the Lord took remnants from the ground and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life therefore creating Eve

Adam was created from mother earth's dust, so i believed Eve's femininity was carefully crafted with God's gentle hands.

i confidently raised my hand saying, "Eve was made from the freshest flowers of earth and the sweetest nectar of the trees; breathed in by the Lord for the breath of life."

this intricate fantasy i curated was met with laughter from my teacher

my female teacher.

it was then i was informed Eve was created from Adam's rib.

a fragment of God's proudest creation

a fragment Adam didn't even require for survival

he had 23 others lying beneath his skin

if God wanted another woman he had 23 identical options

but if God created Eve from a vital organ, Adam would cease to exist

he needed his heart to love his wife

he needed his brain to care for her

he needed his lungs the breathe in her sweet scent

because that's all she was

a sweet thing for Adam to dote on

a sweet thing whose actions exiled them from the garden of Eden
i used to curse Eve's stupidity for falling victim to the devil's deception
i used to loathe Eve's anger
it only came to life from a problem she created
but if i were her, i'd be angry too.
i'd be furious enough to rival the devil himself
to know that i came from a rib
just a rib
smooth porcelain bone
the first line of defense
a shield protecting the vital heart and lungs.

when the class' laughter began to die down, the cold chill of shame crept over my spine
shame
just for being a girl
but it wasn't Eve's fault she was set up for failure
she's not to blame for the ingredients mixed that brought her into this world
we can't ridicule her for being deceived
because as unrealistic as the garden of Eden would be in a contemporary time
the most believable
relatable
and true part of the story
is Eve being created to fail
and the world villainizing a victim.

Student Name: Yashvi Kushwaha

Grade: 11

School: Jordan High School

Title: Cadenzas Bus

Category: Poetry

Key: Silver Key

Educator: William Clouse

The bus creeping up on Trafalgar Square
Two double decker doors filled with despair
Carrier of owls and spirits unknown
Beware your ride home in darkest of night
Sweet, innocent Cadenza came to ride
The moon hid behind the grayest of domes
Her satchel would soon be her last remnant
Black doors closed, she became the sole tenant
Weak legs drifting to the back of the heap
Cadenza sways in the comforting seat
A spider's spindle legs crawl to her feet
A bus ride so scary and bittersweet
Poor sweet Cadenza, she dies in her sleep
A rotting corpse, found with a bite skin-deep

Student Name: Inesh Gupta

Grade: 11

School: Jordan High School

Title: Crisis in Afghanistan: Is Blockchain A Viable Option?

Category: Critical Essay

Key: Silver Key

Educator: Jonathan Frishman

The United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (UNOCHA) stated that approximately 28.3 million people in Afghanistan would need humanitarian assistance in 2023 (“Afghanistan Humanitarian Crisis - Center for Disaster Philanthropy”). This estimate was confirmed by Ramiz Alakbarov, the United Nations Deputy Special Representative and Humanitarian Coordinator for Afghanistan (“Afghanistan Still a Grave Humanitarian Crisis, Senior Aid Official Says”). He reports that the Gross Domestic Product (GDP) of Afghanistan dropped by thirty-five percent, the cost of food rose by thirty percent, and unemployment rose by forty percent. To improve Afghanistan’s economic situation, the United Nations is planning to raise 4.6 billion dollars this year as humanitarian aid (“Afghanistan Still a Grave Humanitarian Crisis, Senior Aid Official Says”). However, Afghanistan’s current head of government—the Taliban—is untrustworthy. “The potential for corruption is a ‘huge risk’” stated Alex Zerden, an adjunct senior fellow at the Center for New American Security and former Treasury Department financial attaché at the U.S. embassy in Kabul (Taruk). Additionally, Andreas Krieg, an associate professor at King’s College London, warns that “foreign and humanitarian aid donated to [Afghanistan] will get into the wrong hands. Under the [previous Ashraf] Ghani government much of these funds were expropriated to fund a kleptocratic regime” (Turak). A kleptocracy is a form of government in which the rulers use their position to steal from their citizens. This includes using foreign funding for the best interests of those in charge instead of the citizens. Due to the possibility of misuse of humanitarian aid, it is necessary to create a system of funding that prevents it.

In order to grasp the concept of blockchain and its success, a few technical terms must be defined. A ledger is a digital log of transactions associated with a financial system. The current method of storing and tracking transaction data relies on one database that stores all of it; this is called a traditional ledger. Because all data is stored in one database, the traditional ledger is held by a single authority. “When there is fear that the person in control of the ledger may not be trustworthy, a single point of failure can become dangerous,” said William Crumpler, a researcher at the Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS), and his colleagues (3). Falsifying and modifying records can occur without the other parties realizing it because of the lack of transparency and singular point of failure. Blockchain systems counter these problems. Haider Dhia Zubaydi

and his colleagues, from the Department of Telecommunications and Media Informatics and Faculty of Electrical Engineering and Informatics at Budapest University of Technology and Economics, define a blockchain system as “a digital distributed ledger that maintains time-stamped transactions which are managed using unique algorithms to keep track of all blocks on the chain” (Zubaydi, et al.). Countries and organizations providing humanitarian aid to Afghanistan should employ the use of blockchain technology for transactions in order to prevent the misuse of funds.

Transparency and Security

To begin, blockchain provides a more organized and safer way of transferring funds. Blockchain technology utilizes asymmetric encryption which uses a public key and a private key—one to encrypt and the other to decrypt stated Xin Guo, Geng Zhang, and Yingfeng Zhang from the School of Mechanical Engineering, Northwestern Polytechnical University. Blockchain uses an elliptic curve encryption algorithm (ECC) which has “high-security performance and low complexity” (Guo, et al.). Lu Chen and her colleagues used a new method, which they named the “fuzzy large-scale group-DEMATEL” —a mix of fuzzy relation clustering (FRC) and decision-making trial and evaluation laboratory (DEMATEL) techniques, in order to use the inputs of a large scale of experts to verify the most important aspects of blockchain. The results showed that security was ranked first in the most significant effects of blockchain. This security provides a safe transmission of transaction data and funds to Afghanistan and back.

Furthermore, this technology utilizes a decentralized structure rather than a centralized structure. The centralized structure means that there is one main server that can get hacked and ruin the whole network. On the other hand, blockchain systems have consensus mechanisms, which are a “series of common rules for each decentralized node to be consistent” (Guo, et al.). This forces the need for approval from each device in the network for the tampering or addition of a block. Therefore, the threat of the Taliban’s misuse of humanitarian aid is diminished because it will need approval from the other parties to be able to use that money for something. In the study made by Lu Chen and her colleagues, they found that transparency and pseudonymity was the fourth most important cause characteristic of blockchain technology. The high visibility allows each node in the network to see and approve transactions. With this level of transparency and security, blockchain can be a viable option to reduce the trust issues between the parties.

Resilience

In his autobiography, *A Long Walk to Freedom*, Nelson Mandela describes his experience in prison. Mandela asserts that together, the prisoners were more resilient to the hardships faced in prison, writing that “the stronger ones raised up the weaker ones” (230). Just like how Mandela identifies that solidarity boosted resilience in prison, the unity of the multiple nodes of a decentralized blockchain system provides greater resilience against attacks. Multiple points of attack require more effort from those trying to

hack. A compromised node—one that got hacked—is raised by its other nodes by denying any unnecessary request to tamper or add a transaction. This makes a blockchain system more resilient to tampering and hacking as compared to a centralized system.

Additionally, the resilience of blockchain technology is shown through its immutability. Nelson Mandela describes that he “would not and could not give...up...[and] lay defeat” (Mandela 230). His resilience is shown through his determination not to quit fighting those who continue apartheid. Similarly, the immutability of blockchain prevents unapproved alterations. The immutability of blockchain technology is one of the six most important characteristics of blockchain systems, say many experts (Chen, et al.). A blockchain system’s immutability is due to the unique cryptographic hashes that represent the value of each block in the chain. If a transaction gets altered, the block’s entire cryptographic hash gets altered. Once this data is sent to the other nodes, the system will notice that the block does not match the rest of the blockchain. Those who are part of the network will then be alerted that something was attempted, and the tampering will be denied. Not only is blockchain held together by its numerous nodes, but it also facilitates an ongoing system of checks to ensure that nothing was tampered with contributing to its resilience to attacks from belligerent parties.

Smart Contracts

Moreover, blockchain technology has the ability to make smart contracts. Zubaydi, Varga, and Molnár state that smart contracts are “computer programs or protocols that allow an agreement to be automatically enforced based on a set of specified conditions” (Zubaydi, et al.). Once the contract is made, it will automatically be enforced without human bias. Smart contracts are able to “[facilitate] trusted transactions without a third party, [reduce] transaction costs[,] and [improve] transaction efficiency” (Guo, et al.). Large-scale experts in this field state that disintermediation is the most important aspect of blockchain technology (Chen, et al.). Disintermediation results in no need to pay for a third party to move money and no need to be able to trust the third party that will be transferring the funds. By providing a process of transferring funds through conditions that reduce intermediaries, smart contracts can reduce the need for trust in a deal, which is important when providing aid to an untrustworthy entity.

Not only do smart contracts provide economic benefits, but they can also spur societal reformation. Through conditions on smart contracts and continuous interaction with Western society, the Taliban and the people of Afghanistan will be introduced to Western ideas. These Western ideas can improve the lives of the Afghan people. For example, the Taliban currently enforces a very strict interpretation of the Islamic Sharia law; therefore, women in Afghanistan do not play a role in society. The Taliban invoked edicts that banned girls from attending secondary school and banned women from working with local and international aid agencies on the ground (“Afghanistan Still a Grave Humanitarian Crisis, Senior Aid Official Says.”). Conditions in smart contracts can build up to forcing the Taliban government to revoke these laws that prevent women from

playing a larger role in society and help promote ideas of equality to the Afghan government. Whether it is viewed politically or socioeconomically, blockchain technology can have a great impact on Afghanistan.

Scalability & Longevity

On the other hand, some critics of the implementation of blockchain argue that Bitcoin, a cryptocurrency based on blockchain, "was touted as useful for remittances in its early days, but as it has scaled it has become slow[.T]ransactions have become exorbitantly expensive, and the network uses an obscene amount of electricity" says Willem van den Berg, a researcher from the Conflict Research Unit at the Netherlands Institute of International Relations Clingendael (van den Berg 4). Because this solution refers to just the transactions between humanitarian organizations, foreign nations, and the government of Afghanistan, the blockchain system does not have to be as scalable as the Bitcoin blockchain because the Bitcoin blockchain will have a node for each person with that currency.

Van den Berg also agrees that the poorest people would not have the money to afford the technology necessary nor have the technological expertise to utilize the technology. However, van den Berg also refers to the example of Somalia's Civil War which created high mobile phone coverage and some of the lowest telecom costs in Africa. Furthermore, blockchain has been shown to be useful by the United Nations' World Food Programme, which used the Ethereum blockchain in 2017 to distribute aid to approximately ten thousand Syrian Refugees in Jordan (van den Berg 2). To make up for this, organizations can provide Afghanistan with the technology necessary to run this system and train Afghan government workers to use it.

Others argue that combating the Afghanistan crisis should be done by providing aid in the form of necessities, like food and shelter, by placing humanitarian workers on the field in Afghanistan. Although this is beneficial, it only provides short-term relief instead of long-term planning for a better Afghanistan. For example, after the provided food runs out, foreign aid will need to resupply food. This creates an unhealthy dependence on support from foreign aid to meet the daily requirements of the people. According to Anthony H. Cordesman, Emeritus Chair in Strategy at the Center for Strategic and International Studies, and his colleague, the World Bank's report on Afghanistan's political and economic status states that "[g]rowth was highly concentrated in the aid-driven service economy" and that "[r]apid growth in public spending...consistently exceeded 50 percent of [Afghanistan's] GDP" (14). The report provided that "Afghanistan experienced increasing poverty alongside high average growth rates" because of the lack of planning involved with the spending (Cordesman and Cormarie 14). However, blockchain systems allow controlled use of humanitarian aid while also providing long-term planning and benefits for the future. The Taliban can then start learning to support a whole government and train government leaders and workers. This could in turn lead to ideas of democracy and equality that will influence citizens and leaders. New ideas can be the catalyst for

equal rights movements necessary for future growth toward a more developed nation. Being able to provide the Afghan government with money and guiding it to gain more financial stability will create a basis that will allow for the self-sufficiency that Afghanistan's government so desperately needs to steer itself onto the right track toward long-term development.

Conclusion

In conclusion, blockchain exhibits multiple characteristics that allow it to be able to improve the weak government and poor conditions the people of Afghanistan face. The multiple crises in Afghanistan have led to many problems for the citizens of Afghanistan who must deal with starvation, poverty, and much more. Humanitarian aid aims to make the situation for those living in Afghanistan better; however, the current government of Afghanistan—the Taliban—has a record of illegal activities and is mistrusted by many. Blockchain systems allow the ability to make smart contracts that are safe, reliable, and transparent. By limiting the Afghan government to what will be best for the people, blockchain's smart contracts allow organizations and other countries to donate money to the Afghan government without the need for trust. This creates the ability to influence Afghanistan's government and future for the better without risking the creation of an aid-dependent economy.

"Order not your life as though you had ten thousand years to live. Fate hangs over you. While you live, while yet you may, be good" said Marcus Aurelius Antoninus, a former Roman emperor and stoic philosopher. He stresses that one's morality is above all else (Antoninus). Morality consists of the principles by which one discerns right from wrong. Is utilizing a system that provides a more secure method of aiding those in need wrong? Foreign support through smart contracts could be the key to unlocking a brighter future for Afghanistan and its citizens.

Student Name: Christine Marinho
Grade: 12
School: Jordan High School
Title: Cynicism; Cytology; and Henrietta's Cells
Category: Critical Essay
Key: Silver Key
Educator:

The concept of the science fictional lab rat has been the object of some of humanity's greatest fears since the moment it came into fruition. The utterance of its name alone is enough to bring to mind visions of grotesque genetic manipulation and inhumane experimentation. However, the rise of biotechnology and cell culture has ushered in a new type of test subject, man. As we enter this new frontier of genetic mapping and molecular engineering, scientists have been made to examine the ethical implications of doing this kind of invasive experimentation. While Cytology and genetic mapping may initially seem like fascinating leaps toward the future, it is vital that scientists' ambitions never surpass the bounds of what is morally just in order to remain within legal boundaries regarding consent, prevent excessive experimentation, and protect the privacy and general well-being of patients/subjects.

Mankind has always possessed the innate desire to bend the laws of human nature. The allure of circumventing the limits of what we originally believed was possible is one of the major driving factors for scientists in the field of biotechnology. Unfortunately, this ambition, especially when left unchecked, often results in the exploitation and manipulation of innocent subjects (which proves to be especially harmful when these "subjects" are real people). The story of Henrietta Lacks is one of the most famous examples of this unfortunate phenomenon. Henrietta Lacks was an African American woman who developed cervical cancer in the 1960s. During her treatment, Henrietta's doctor took it upon himself to take a biopsy of the cancerous cells in her cervix (citing the principle of implied consent) and sent them off to George Geys's lab to be examined (Skloot 42). It was there that lab technicians discovered that He-La cells (Henrietta's cells) were able to proliferate indefinitely, enabling them to survive and reproduce in cell culture. He-La cells exploded into a lucrative multibillion-dollar industry, all done without the consent of Henrietta who grew increasingly ill and eventually passed away. This compromising legal situation was ignored for so long simply because "Paperwork typically says as long as your genetic material can't be identified back to you, it's OK to use it for research or commercial purposes" (Henrietta Lacks' family sues biotech company). Fortunately, since Henrietta's Cells were eventually publicly identified, this situation has been classified as a breach of the Common Rule, one of the laws that govern medical consent in the United States; and Henrietta's family is now seeking justice for a

plethora of reasons. Aside from the fact that the retrieval of her cells was an ethical violation, family members still feel the sting of being kept in the dark about her cells and not receiving a single dime for all the advancements they had helped to accomplish. In a world where their mother, daughter, sister, and friend had saved millions of lives, they themselves continued to live in squalor, deprived of basic necessities like proper healthcare. As the family's representative stated during a recent press release, the family expresses their dismay at the fact "These companies are treating Henrietta Lacks' living cells as chattel to be bought and sold"(Davies). This powerful comparison exposes the fact that the effects of making executive decisions without keeping the patient's best interests in mind, transcend the bounds of mere legal liability. The exploitative dynamic between Henrietta's family and the major pharmaceutical companies who profited off her cells has paid a cruel homage to America's dark history of oppressing African Americans through the institution of slavery. This debacle is just one of the many reasons why scientists should be forced to adhere to stricter ethical codes. Initiatives like the Common Law are a good start, but there needs to be heftier penalties for companies and researchers who consistently violate patient privacy/confidentiality terms to placate their own curiosities and line their pockets.

While the ceiling of innovation can often seem limitless, there is a boundary between experimentation guided by sound principles and objectives, and genetic manipulation for the sake of manipulation. A perfect example of this can be seen in the field of cytology, the culturing of cells. Cell culture has opened the door for the creation of organoids/assembloids, clusters of an organism's somatic cells resembling an organ in the body, that are now being implanted into certain rat species to analyze human intracellular activity when placed under various stressors. The scientific discoveries this technique could uncover, have the potential to lead to the development of drugs that help treat physical and neurological conditions that had previously been considered incurable. While scientists assert that these organoids are not sentient in any way, serious ethical concerns have risen regarding how implantation affects the host organisms. These moral reservations are so compelling that certain professionals don't even feel comfortable testing this technology on apes because of their close genetic relationship to humans. Bio ethicist Insoo Hyun expressed his worry regarding the unabridged use of this kind of biological augmentation stating, "If you have an advance for one purpose, you cannot necessarily prevent other people from using that same advance to do something else that the founder of that technology would not approve of" (Weintraub). Hyun's concerns are ultimately well-founded. If technology of this caliber ended up in the hands of individuals with malicious intent, it could very easily incite the creation of black market industries that engage in the buying and selling of human organoids for nefarious purposes (without the consent of cell donors). The potential for it to be abused makes it difficult to discern whether the possibility of innovation is worth the high risks.

The field of biotechnology has the potential to bring about significant medical advancements. While concern still lies in the fact that the tentative approach genomic

research demands, contradicts the feverish speed at which innovation drives action, there is still hope for restoring the integrity of biotechnology as an industry. Periodic laboratory/medical practice inspections, harsher financial penalties, and mandating the consultation of lawyers in the event of potential malpractice are all possible ways to reverse the unfortunate trends that are taking place. The steps we take today will directly influence the state of our tomorrow; therefore, we must institute these reforms now, while a lot of this technology is still in its infancy, in order to lay the foundation for a positive, impactful legacy.

Student Name: Shristi Gupta

Grade: 9

School: Jordan High School

Title: Dandelion

Category: Short Story

Key: Silver Key

Educator:

Chapter 1

I took a sip of the boiling substance, foam gathering at the sides of my lips from the surface of the liquid. My hands folded around the sturdy, thick red handle, my bruises suddenly throbbing with a painful yet relieving sensation as I tightened my grip around the mug. Dryness echoed inside my throat which was followed by a river of warmth that flooded the inside of my body. I closed my eyes, sensing the pain in my limbs gradually alleviate. I lifted the mug above my chin with satisfaction, swallowing the last bit of drops from the bottom of the porcelain beauty with content.

"You're welcome," a striding voice chuckled. His bleak calmness brought me back to reality, aggravating my insides once again, my grip tightening on the embossed coffee cup to stop myself from socking his conceited face. Once I finished inhaling the drink, I slammed the ceramic cup on the nearby table, which looked like a fragile piece of wood that could snap in half at the landing of a fly.

"You think you deserve a thank you?! After that stupid stunt you played on the battlefield, you're lucky you're not dead!" My eyes widened as I scowled at the pale-faced boy, his trimmed brown beard bearing a fresh scar. The sides of his lips were turned upward playfully, yet his gray eyes held the smallest hint of fear. It made me frustrated. Most of all, it made me sick.

"I got you a drink. If I was that little rascal you call me every day, I would've ditched your sorry butt and I would've been back home to my sister," he huffed, crossing his arms as his mouth shifted into a straight line while he muttered something under his breath. "Sir," he added a moment later.

"Ay, Regie!" A tall man with broad shoulders walked into the tent. His armor was thick metal with various intricate carvings throughout the pieces that draped over his chest and back. A brown, full-sleeved shirt covered the rest of his pale skin besides his face, which was crowded with his curly moustache that was somehow neatly trimmed to fit his meaty stature; it was a short but thick strip of hair over his upper lip that accentuated his sharp jawline and small features. The golden-brown in his hair complimented his light blue eyes that reminded me of the blue sky that was over us before we left Kitgone a few days ago.

"Max. I see you've been well..." I trailed off, letting out a huff of irritation.

"I have. In fact, aye been thinkin' of scoutin' the area for any pests in case of an attack. I was hopin' Rocky would wanna join us in the hunt!" Max exclaimed, an ebullient smile spread over his face.

"Nobody wants to-"

"Actually, I think you do," I interrupted Rocky, a grin spreading on my lips as he stared at me with distastefulness. His eyes were seething with fury, and his lips pushed inward into a thin line. He silently turned his head back toward Max, restlessly tapping his finger on the chair's armrest repeatedly. He was thinking about something deeply. I leaned back in my chair with ease, satisfaction teasing the corners of my mouth.

"Perfecto! We'll start tomorrow mornin' an-"

"Sir Regiantine! We've been attacked!" A scrawny juvenile sprinted inside the tent, out of breath with scratches covering his tanned skin. I'd never seen him around the camp, meaning he wasn't part of the Heathe, which was the Kitgonian army.

"By whom?!" I sprung out of my seat and gave a trepidatious stare at the dauntless boy.

"The Artiens."

Chapter 2

"Lola!" I heard a familiar voice scream. It was Mother. My deceitful, scheming mother who would go through great lengths to mold me into the obedient "beast" she wished for every night. I could feel my heartbeat quicken as the wind swept the hair out of my face, Dandelion galloping down the hill with expeditious momentum. My petticoat blew in the wind like a parachute. If only I was a man, I fantasized bitterly. My sore, bare feet ached after I readjusted them onto the metal stirrup.

"Dandy, I know," I reassured her after she whinnied for the thirtieth time, stroking the side of her neck, our speed accelerating as the slope became steeper. Her white coat shone in the bright sunlight, her cropped blonde mane running down to her back in a straight line. "You may end up growing out your mane like Jay at this rate," I added playfully before realizing we were in immediate danger.

"Lola! Artiena needs you right now! What will happen when their only princess flees from her duties?" Mother yelled. Instinctively, I hollered back at her. I regretted those words the instant they left my mouth.

“Artiena has five Princes who can rule when you go to Hell!” As soon as I let the words glide out my throat, I knew it was the end of my escape. It was as if I was asking for a quick way to heaven. By now, she must have deduced our location. The realization that she was aware of our whereabouts lingered in my thoughts, piercing the insides of my brain like sharp knives stabbing a piece of meat. I attempted to hold back waterfalls and concentrate ahead on the road instead, attempting to make my way into the dense wooded land that crowded the area ahead of me. I could lose her there. I only needed two minutes.

“Found you.”

The next minute went so fast I couldn’t process it. Something beige flashed beside me and wrapped around my neck. A sudden pain exploded in my throat and the next thing I knew I was flying to the ground, facing the bright blue sky above me. I began gasping for air, but the little oxygen I had earlier got knocked out from the impact of my body hitting the hard, rough ground. I began coughing while I clawed at the thick rope around my throat, squirming on the grass as my eyelids began closing. It felt like darkness was swallowing me, a thick black hole enveloping my eyes. The last thing I saw was a shadow of a woman leaning over me.

Chapter 3

“CHARGE!” I heard a grown man bellow out in the distant, rugged terrain, his voice firm and adamant. The fight had really come to us, and we weren’t prepared. I had never experienced such humility from my actions. How is it conceivable that the army’s leader was not ready for an ambush? My lips quivered as I sought to devise an arguable excuse as to why there were thousands of bloody bodies littered everywhere around our base; lifeless bodies of our comrades and medics, along with the inert forms of guard tigers and pristine supplies like bows and arrows, lay scattered around, drenched in dark, crimson red blood.

“Chief! We need you here right now!” I whipped around to see the scrawny juvenile, expecting him to be hiding behind a stack of barrels filled with red wine so if any of them were shot, the opaque liquid would make it look like he was dead. Instead, he was holding a magnificent, pale, wooden bow with a sack of arrows hanging around his waist. I couldn’t help but admire the boy, a fierce emotion burning through his brown pupils while a façade of a warrior was strewn across his miniature face.

“We’re not going down without a fight, are we?” I stepped towards him and reached out my hand. It was a sign of acceptance and peace, as well as a sign of appreciation towards the receiver.

"Thanks, Chief," he leaned in and whispered as yells and chokes splintered our ears from the skirmish surrounding us.

"Your name?" I questioned as I pulled out my gold-tinted sword, a beauty only the King's warriors got as a token of their hard work. It wasn't worth all the effort I put in when I was a mere child, training sixteen hours without a bite of food nor a sip of water, but it was a nice piece of compensation to brag to others now that I'd earned it.

"Earny, sir," he replied with a sheepish smile.

"Earny, are you ready to fight?"

"What do you think?" As he concluded his sentence, he rapidly shot an arrow into the ear of an Artienan soldier who was running towards us with a spear in his hands. Instantaneously, the soldier fell to the ground as a bloody puddle began flooding out of the wounded area.

"I guess I underestimated you," I grinned wildly. I had never seen such precise movements nor accuracy in an archer before. He could be useful in the future.

"You weren't the first to," he retorted with a shrug. "It's what enables me to be a skilled double agent when the situation demands." He looked up to my face with expectant eyes, scintillating as if they had found the one thing they had been longing for.

"No, if you're thinking about that-" I stopped myself from finishing the sentence and shook my head, pressing my fingers to my temple.

"Just think about it; I'll be a mere servant after being captured, but if I can get them to trust me, I'll get all their layouts," he spoke eagerly, vexing me. It was too dangerous, and he knew that all too well. Our last double agent was staked in the town center of Artiena.

"Are you crazy?" I continued to shake my head violently, thoughts clouding my mind as I attempted to conceive another positive solution that could bring about an end to the war, leaving the Kitgonians victorious.

"You know that we're losing horribly. We don't have enough supplies nor as many allies as Artiena. We're continuously losing small skirmishes, just like we'll lose this one. My life would be nothing compared to the thousands that are going to die if I don't go out there," he pleaded, fidgeting his fingers into geometric shapes.

"We'll talk about it later. Right now, we need-"

A sudden pain shattered into my ribs, my lungs going numb. I could feel some force near my esophagus, a painful stabbing sensation flooding my back.

"Chief!" I heard Earny cry, then scream with agony right after. Had he died? I swirled around to see the boy, only for darkness to overlay my eyes. I felt dizzy and nauseous,

screams and angry roars blurring into a deafening ring that continuously buzzed throughout my head.

"The chief is here. I think I might've killed the bugger," a deep, grubby voice chuckled. Was he talking about me?

"Well, the Queen's gonna pay a fortune to us when she finds out we got the leader of the Kitgonos, or whatever they call themselves these days," another voice chimed in, much higher pitched than the first one. They both seemed to be male warriors from the hint of anger and roughness in their deep voices.

"We'll bring him to Artiena tomorrow. After all, his body would be hung beside the flag of Artiena for all to laugh upon."

Chapter 4

I opened my eyes to a brightly lit room, sunlight filling my view as my eyelids split apart from each other. The sun was blinding yet comfortable, the warmth flooding my skin from the outside in. I sat up, soon realizing I was laying on a soft surface. I looked around, the mesmerizing surroundings suddenly becoming familiar. It was my bedroom. White, tightly tucked sheets lay beneath me while neatly placed pillows sat up against my pink headboard beside me. I had chosen this color when I was a toddler, yet Mother still refused to replace it despite the fact I'm now currently two months away from officially debuting as a woman. I groaned as I got up, my head throbbing with immense pressure.

"I'm so glad you're awake!" A cheery voice piped, her voice digging an irritating hole through my eardrum. I turned towards my door, a white wooden rectangle with a black metal handle that was on the opposing wall to my expansive window which was outlined with white metal. Everything about the situation was frustrating, especially after witnessing Amy smile at me like she found a gold coin near the Baptist Church.

"What do you want, Amy?" I scrunched up my nose as she stepped inside my room, closing the door behind her. She was always smiley and excited even on the worst, filthiest days. It was as if she had never experienced pain, misery, or even a heartbreak. She was sickening to look at, her freckles always contorted in odd shapes from her dimples, the smile she wore everyday changing slightly from when I was a child up to now. Today, it seemed like it was almost forced, something I hadn't ever seen. It was something new. If I knew Amy, then something new meant something went wrong in her "planning".

"You're not going to greet your favorite maid servant?" She shook her head and giggled, stepping up to the side of my bed with a sigh. A shiver vibrated something odd under my

skin, a nauseating feeling creeping behind me. I turned away from the maid, her two brown ponytails reminding me how everything was before everything changed. Before Artiena waged a war against the Kitgonos. Before Father died in the war only for Mother to become a snake of a queen and pursue the Kitgonos in order to end their life with humiliation and pain, adding to the suffering this battle has already caused to thousands of innocent lives. Everything about this castle now disgusted me.

"You know, Princess, I wished for something magical a few hours ago. I really did. It was truly beautiful, an immaculate event I hoped would be true, but it was just out of my reach. I hope you don't mind if I share it with you," Amy shuffled to my vanity while speaking in a childish voice. She scared me in a weird way, as if something wasn't right in her head. Yet, my mother loved her so that meant she could stay and take care of her "disgraceful master". She then began waltzing a few moments later, humming a faint tune I couldn't make out. Had she gone berserk?

"Why do you need to tell me that?" I scoffed, staring out my window to see tall, lush green trees on a nearby hill, my room far above anything else in the vicinity of the castle.

"Because, Princess, you're my only friend," she replied softly, then continued her humming as she rummaged through my dresser, drawers flying open while she tossed my makeup all over the room.

"What are you looking for?" I groaned, sitting up to lean my back against the headrest.

"A little..." she began, slurring her words together, pausing while her fingers glided over something shiny in one of the drawers. Before I could take a closer look at what she was eyeing at with satisfaction, the memories of the chase outside the castle erupted inside my brain. I could feel a hallowing feeling emerge from the bottom of my stomach.

"Tiny..." Amy continued, her voice the same slow, slurred voice. I began getting off the bed, my vision blurring as memories continued to flood my body. I felt horrible, as if I was going to catch a fever.

"Toy."

I looked up, attempting to keep my breathing steady as some hot air blew at the top of my head. I could feel goosebumps emerge in a line from my neck to my arms, then my legs.

Amy was towering over me, a vicious smile painted onto her face as she cast a shadow over me. A pocketknife was inches away from my eye, the holder's pale arm trembling, not with fear but with anger and resentment.

"See, your brother told me to finish the job if Queen Vanessa didn't. It's imperative he becomes King. After all, he's the one who's on the battlefield, drawing every last blood, sweat, and tear for the kingdom while you, a pathetic and useless pro-Kitgonian who never should deserve to be the queen of the mighty Artiena, stay bottled up in her safe haven! You're a disgrace to all," She roared, seething with fury. I swallowed hard, my

eyelash rubbing against the silver blade. She tightly gripped the black plastic handle, adorned with drawings I made of tiny flowers for my thirteenth birthday.

"Amy, I know you're mad," I calmly said, trying to seem harmless and mature.

"You don't understand! The Queen is the only reason you're alive!" She screamed, the knife shaking more than before as she grit her teeth.

"I do-"

"Did you know, King Matheius planned on wedding you to the Kitgonos just last year before he passed?" She chuckled, lowering her hand, continuing to laugh maniacally. I froze, my eyes wide with fear.

"No, he di-"

"Did you know it was so you could be sent there and get beheaded, and Artiena wouldn't have to

be known as the kingdom who killed their only princess?" She continued, playing with the knife by intertwining her fingers around it in intricate patterns.

"Oh, and did you know, you were supposed to be dead by the time you turned thirteen?"

Student Name: Michael Campa jr
Grade: 12
School: Cinco Ranch High School
Title: Do you recognize me?
Category: Personal Essay & Memoir
Key: Silver Key
Educator: Mary Sarver

Do you want to meet her? It's up to you if you do," my dad said calmly as he sat me down. I immediately knew who he was referring to: my mom. There were a thousand questions I had in my head, but none of them concluded that I should ask her in person. "I'm not sure I'm ready for that, and neither is she".

There was nothing I remember of my mother, as she was never really there for me. The only memory that would've flashed in my head constantly when remembering my mother was the fact that I remember seeing her get arrested while I held my sister, crying at the sight. We were only kids, and seeing that wasn't the best reimpression for her. Of course, when my dad sat me down in the living room, I was debating whether I should, and he and I both negotiated that I would only go if my sister went. He assured me that he wasn't forcing me to go, but it would ease his mind if I were there with my sister. I caved in and agreed, but still, I was not too fond of the idea of seeing her, as I only think of her with such disdain.

February 12 was the day I agreed to meet my mother. I put on my jacket as it was still really chilly, but I made sure not to dress up too nicely, as it would seem that I didn't care to look good for her. My sister was excited but nervous. She had her makeup done carefully, and her outfit made her look unrecognizable to me. "You want to see her? Why?" I asked. She looked confused and said, "I miss her." My dad took a while as we waited on the stairs for him. When we saw him walk out of his room, he looked nervous, like he expected something terrible to happen. He quickly grabbed his keys and said, "Let's roll".

The car ride consisted of silence and anticipation. I knew my dad felt uneasy about this, and I did as well, except it was for different reasons. When we arrived, my dad stopped the car in front of my grandma's apartment, where my mom was staying. He gave out a sigh and said, "Guys, be careful. If you hear anything about me that isn't nice, just know that you heard it from me first. She will try to make me seem like the bad guy and that I took all of you away from her. Just know that I love you guys, and I'm giving her another chance". I nodded and shook his hand, while my sister gave nothing but silence before she spoke, "I'll never look at you differently, Dad, I promise." I didn't hesitate for a moment as I gave him the same promise and got out of the car.

I walked my sister to the door, and I let out a sigh of disappointment. I wasn't relieved to be there, nor was this a response to how nervous I was. I knocked on the door, hoping for a quick answer. I looked at my sister as we waited for a response. I see how she seemed so anxious as she bit her nails and looked around her surroundings. I comforted her as soon as we heard a bark from dogs inside the apartment. I was hoping no one would be home and we would be forced to leave, but, to my surprise, someone opened the door—my mom.

I glanced at her, picking off every detail of her face that seemed similar to mine. I never realized before how much I looked like her, but her feminine features seemed to parallel mine. I haven't moved my gaze that was filled with hatred and anger. Although my sister felt differently, she did not care about the abandonment and cruel memories my mother left behind, but instead embraced my mother with a passionate and forgiving hug. I saw the wistful tears run down my mother's eyes as her grip on my sister grew tighter. She was sorry for what she'd done, but even then, I wasn't quick to forgive her. As I saw this sight of my mother, I began to question, why? Why would you leave me and my sister with my dad? To do something else like drugs and alcohol? Why couldn't you prove to my dad that you are finally worthy to take care of us? What took you so long? My thoughts filled my mind with anger and sadness. I clouded my mind with my morals as I felt like I should feel bad for my mother, yet I didn't. As soon as my sister let go, she looked at my mom and said, "I missed you so much," with tears coming from her eyes. I choked up, seeing my sister. All I could think about was how it was all my mother's fault. She finally took her gaze from my sister and directed it towards me. Tears ran down my eyes, but I wiped them off quickly so she wouldn't mistake my tears to be for her but instead for my sister. I hugged her and put her head on my chest while she cried. My mother was shorter than me and made it known by apologizing and saying how tall and mature I looked. I felt terrible for my mom as it seemed that she was sorry for what she had done, like the abandonment left her guilty for years. I finally wiped the tears from my eyes with my sleeve, and she did the same as I stared at her and told her, "I missed you too." It was the truth. I was so angry because I missed my mother's love.

She walked us into the apartment, and I saw the two dogs that barked at us before my mom opened the door. One was short and annoying, while the other one was big and old. I grabbed the small one, and the dog licked my face so much I gave a little gag and put the dog down. The apartment was about the same as what I remembered when I was younger. I saw my sister sitting on the couch with my mom, having a meaningful conversation while I looked at my grandma. My grandma came from upstairs and gave out a happy scream as she came to hug me. I let out my arms and hugged her with a smile, reaching from ear to ear. I loved my grandma and always will, for she took care of me, especially because she looked after my sister. My grandma directed us to where my sister and mom were. She gave out the same happy screech when seeing my sister and hugged her. After that, we all sat down on the couch where my mom stopped talking to my sister and looked at me and said, "Do you recognize me?" The question was so

simple, yet I hesitated for a moment. I looked at my mother up and down and still couldn't come up with a response. I remembered all of the lost memories she didn't have. She didn't know me at all, I thought. So, instead of giving her an answer to her question, I asked her something in return. "Do you?"

Student Name: Layla Loll

Grade: 12

School: Cinco Ranch High School

Title: Ekphrastic Poem-Waterhouse's Echo and Narcissus

Category: Poetry

Key: Silver Key

Educator: Jason Spencer

O loving love, o dearest self

Laurels green painted, face divine

Tender god-touched, locks o'ergrown

How exalted amongst men of men

How sweet the epithets

O honeyed voice, o dearest self

Robes flowing water, arms steadfast

Brows set in sunlight, lips holy fair

How clever those piercing eyes

How vast the dreams

O weaver hands, o dearest self

Quiver rings true, bow seldom misses

Vast beauty given, brushed sanctity

How drawn the muse's skin

How statuesque

O loving love, o dearest self

Student Name: Catherine Xu
Grade: 9
School: Jordan High School
Title: how to love yourself like the moon
Category: Poetry
Key: Silver Key
Educator:

i.

i was told there is so much
one could wish upon a shooting star,
but for me,
i wish for a world where
i would not feel the need to make such wishes,
especially not upon the burning body of a dying star.
falling, falling, falling,
too busy disintegrating to grant those silly wishes
people call hope.

ii.

during the day,
i fall for people under the cream blue sky.
that one friend from elementary school,
boys who brush past me in the hallways,
the barista at the local cafe where i study,
anyone beneath cotton clouds
who burns just as brightly as the sun.

at night,

i fall for the moon who is
the only one that sees my pain yet still decides to stay.
i fall for the stars that i one day hope
i will be allowed to cradle within starlight arms.
i fall for myself
because, if i do not,
then no one else will.

iii.

nature is the most beautiful when
blanketed under a cover of stars and shadows,
where crickets and cicadas serenade the moon
that illuminates all beneath her monotone filter.
where i am able to cocoon myself within cricket songs and moonlight
and learn to yearn
for those who do not yearn back.

iiii.

on nights where silence is lost
behind concrete walls of slamming doors,
shattered mirror words,
arms and a head adorned with liquid rubies,
i learn to live up, up in the ripe plum sky
and simply exist under the watchful gaze of the moon
until she is chased away over the horizon
by blinding beams of sun
that banish loud, loud voices into the dreary depths of slumber.

iiii.

i feel prettier when moonlit,
pretty as the moonflowers
nudged to full bloom by gentle fingertips of Night,
who wraps me up in swaths of static and security,
fashions me new dreams,
and grants my frosted visions of a girl who is beauty.
visions where she is me, just that one moment
a shimmering mirage grazing fingertips under starlight
that i hope will one day may bloom to fruition,
like fireflies blinking over inky skies
as morning glories spreading petals in greeting and farewells.

indeed,

i feel much prettier
when no one is there to see.

iiiiii.

sometimes i wonder-
what does the moon see?
she must see everything
from where she reside,
strung high up on the ink curtain sky,
nestled between wisps of cotton clouds.
everyone, everything,
every new life created, every old one snuffed out,
she must see everything.

sometimes i wonder-
what does the moon know?
she must know everything
that happens under her watchful gaze.
scattered stars her informants scurrying to her shimmering mirage
telling her
every secret, every lie,
every new discovery, every discovery yet to be made,
she must know everything.

sometimes i wonder-
how does the moon feel?
she must feel everything
as the gentle guardian of night,
bound to a life of secrecy and solitude,
existing for the sole purpose of just being
there, above all else.
untouchable, immortal,
irresistibly beautiful, terrifyingly bare,
she must feel everything.

up there-
away, away-
she must feel lonely.

iiiiiii.
once upon a time,
i wished upon a shooting star

to become a star myself.

an existence,

high up

and away,

where i can love the moon

and she can love me back.

Student Name: Grace Gao
Grade: 11
School: James E Taylor High School
Title: I won't lock the door anymore
Category: Poetry
Key: Silver Key
Educator: Ericca Fader

Mom,

When will you come visit me?

In the house I shared with you
My mind threw me to the lands I thought I knew
I dreamt of towering heights and sleepless nights
the future I've held so tightly had no belonging in a place so unsightly
I yearned for the bustle of the crowd
The chilled wind flowed unbound and proud
An ocean of lights failed to let me see
A love that made it easy to be me
I knew my home as nothing more than old cellar walls bound to fall
But without you, I'd be nowhere at all
Now my fire that once glowed
fizzled out with the snow
In greed that once burned
Lingered a love that I never thought I'd yearned

In a barren land, my mother would take me by the hand
The labyrinth of the city transported me to an empty land
The bareness of the room

Reminded me of fields of flowers once in bloom

The numbness of my face

Brings to mind a happier place

When the weather was warm

Thin arms protected me from the storm

and through the smokescreen of the sky

is a life that passed me by

revealing what I failed to discover:

the love of a mother

I had locked myself in

a thin door to separate kin

failing to hear the heave in your sigh

and bags under your eyes

I feel ashamed to notice now after a while

for the warmth of your smile

and the wrinkles in your grin

make the clouds shy away and let sunshine roll in

I'm not young anymore

I won't lock the door anymore

The steps I've taken forwards have just led me to turn my head in wait

Not in regret for the life I have, but the life I never knew how to appreciate

So I'm sorry I ever shut the door

I love you to the moon and furthermore

secrets I've held in my heart

Break down in the distance we've spent apart

I'll do the best with what I have

Knowing you tried your hardest with even less than I had

Student Name: Moreblessing Simbabure

Grade: 11

School: Jordan High School

Title: In Blackest Night

Category: Short Story

Key: Silver Key

Educator: William Clouse

The New York humidity had me on edge, and I was glad my tight silk dress was sleeveless. Cool conditions bring me back to our objective and I take a moment to check out Korbyn's attire. A French silver Italian cut three-piece suit, pinstripe and well-tailored to his frame. On his broad shoulders snugly hugged a light, linen wool overcoat. A match for his diplomatic personality for the evening. I have on a lavender silk dress which is ruffled at the hem. It wears delicately against my body, accentuating my figure but also allowing for free movement. We looked like we belonged. That's what mattered.

That's what we need people to think.

I let my fingers brush against the bedazzled clutch in my hands as it twinkles in the moonlight. From it, a golden glare reflects off onto the Rolls Royce's carpet. We come to a stop at the gala. Flashing lights flit through the window when the driver holds the door open for us. While I get out, my heels grind against the gravel and I take Korbyn's arm. I force the corners of my lips to pull back to reveal pearly whites. It feels more genuine when we begin to stroll on the red carpet into the manor. We are welcome with champagne and a bird's eye view of the gala. From the landing, I can see the three levels of golden balcony wrapped around the titanic great hall. A diamond chandelier glimmers along the glass tables and polished wood chairs on the first floor. Guests clad in shimmery dresses and straight suits mingle amongst themselves along with waitresses and waiters serving gourmet appetizers and champagne weaving in and out.

Arm-in-arm we waltz down the quartz staircase accompanied by a glossy cedar handrail. We address some familiar faces in the room and at last, in my view, I distinguish the target, Mr. Hall. Tall, snowflake skin, and chiseled features but old with age, he stood in a pinstripe suit with a few coworkers. Mr. Hall seems to carry an exceptional ambiance that kept smiles around him wherever he existed.

A quality that a profitable drug lord should have.

As I converse my way to the most affluent ladies I survey around the great hall. This time the target's acquaintance approaches me. Her studded carmine dress contrasts her tawny skin and immediately she is gifted with praises from the other women. Her deep-set eyes hold a kind gaze to my own as she smiles, a line of definite white ivories glinting at me.

"Auretta, always looking like the diamond of the room." Kate, the lady in a ginger bob, comments. I nod along with the other women.

She extends her hand out to me.

"Auretta Hall," she greets. I smile hearing a typical northern accent with smooth vowels and low endings. Mrs. Hall, another wolf in sheep's clothing. Her attempt at putting on an American accent is worse than Korbyn's. I pull my lips into a wide smile while I notice the precious blood diamonds crowning her wrist.

"Lennon Courts," I respond. Auretta's eyes avert, scanning my lavender sheath of a silk dress, eyeing my figure but not sizing me up.

"I have to say, Ms. Courts, that dress fits you so well," Auretta regards. A waitress saunters up holding out a platter of champagne.

"Miss?" Her sun-bleached bun stands out against her black and white uniform. Auretta takes a glass, simultaneously I make eye contact with the waitress, Lilith. She winks, denoting security surveillance is down, before offering champagne to everyone.

"Thank you, so is yours, it's quite the eye-catcher," I acknowledge back. I motion towards Auretta's bracelet, "Gorgeous bracelet."

"Much obliged, but I'll admit," she leans in, "It took some time to select, a number of their jewelry does look slightly garish," I raise my eyebrows at this.

"Their distinguished pieces do make up for it, do you shop at Graff often?" I angle towards her. There are two types of rich people. Half of them gloat and try to kiss the ass of the wealthier with the sole goal of adorning their body with brands. By them, I mean being Mrs. Hall. All I have to do tonight is talk about these adamant logos. So through these trademarks, I was practically friends in Mrs. Hall's superficial mind. It's enough to walk and talk along the manor's corridors. While we peruse the gold-framed paintings along the crown-molded walls, I browse for something heavy.

"You know, I have also bought artwork by-," she hasn't stopped prattling on since I've centered our conversation about her. I'll admit, talking about art with such individuals is enjoyable, while it lasts. At the same moment, I account for the two bodyguards who despite their height have stayed hidden in the corner of my eye. My fingers brush against my clutch but I scan a wooden dresser decorated with adornments on our left. One of them being a metal book, however, I can see Mrs. Hall having traumatizing brain damage.

Maintaining simple tactics, I identify the pivot point in Mrs. Hall's jaw, which is not hard since she's been moving her tongue to maintain 'being' American. Just a hit, not enough to break any nerves or blood vessels underneath the thin skin. My eyes avert to the bodyguards. In seconds my knuckle hits just behind her jaw. She gasps before silence finally follows my ears. She sags against me.

"Hey!" I hear a deep voice boom. Favorable thing, that these walls were thick. I rest Mrs. Hall against the dresser. I then move to grab the turquoise vase. I whip around. Few feet from me was one of the bodyguards. The lanky one. I hurl the vase. It explodes against his face, and his legs give way. I dart into an empty room. My heel straps now digging into my toes. I wince. I crouch underneath a cloth-covered table. Dust dots my hands as I wrap a piece of furniture cloth around my knuckles. Soft clicks echo nearby. I wait until I see a pair of dress shoes. Wide dress shoes. The shoes of the other bodyguard. Straight off I spring forward. The cloth wraps around his ankles. I wrench them towards me. A thud follows. I scramble from under the table. He tries to get up. I lunge over him and use the cloth as a garrote. I pull. He chokes out, his pale hands lunging at the white cloth. Soon it's spotted with red. Along with his limp body on the ground. My chest tightens with each breath and I usher myself back into the hallway. In the middle of it was Korbyn.

"You left a mess," he comments, pointing to the turquoise vase shattered along the red carpet.

"Broken glass can be explained, limp bodies cannot," I add, hooking my arms under Mrs. Hall's shoulders. Her head lolls to the side with each drag I take towards the clothed furniture room. Once inside I press my hand against her pulse. "She's breathing," I inform Korbyn. He files over to me. I gently press onto one of Mrs. Hall's eyelids. In the dim light, we see her contacts slip exposing bloodshot whites around her rolled-back pupils. "I noticed this earlier," I move a black bang and wipe some makeup off her cheek. It reveals pale skin, a stark contrast from her magenta undertones. That's irrational, it seemed to me that the Hall couple didn't do drugs, that they only partnered for gluttony.

"And these two are out," Korbyn signs towards the idle bodyguards against a cloth-covered closet. He places his hands on his hips, giving me a once-over. "There's six more." I chew the inside of my bottom lip.

"Are they all like this?" I stretch my arms up wide. Korbyn chuckles and begins to stride out of the room.

"One of the reasons we work together," he calls out. I simper, following him.

"Don't get comfortable." Korbyn scoffs, adjusting his gelled hair. I saunter up to one of the framed mirrors in the hallway, pick at my afro, and smooth out my dress. After, I finish applying lip gloss before turning it over to uncap the other side. A blue bolt of electricity travels between the cap and the bottom, a tingle shoots down my fingertips. I place it in my clutch.

"I'm significantly," he drags out, "more than the average height."

"Keep dreaming. Where's Mr. Hall?" A dimple appears on Korbyn's cheek. He fixes his gaze at me,

"He'll be here soon." I inspect the empty hallway.

"Well, he would look for h-," I'm interrupted by multiple footsteps so I slip my arm through Korbyn's. His face changes from grinning like the cat who caught the canary to a pondering aristocrat. He scrunches his eyebrows and starts to go on about the art on the walls. I begin to giggle. Our looming shadows cover any suspicions of bloody activity. Mr. Hall was now tramping down the hallway only accompanied by two bodyguards. I hold back a frown with a chuckle, the other four guards will get here somehow. Korbyn smiles, his dimples not showing as Mr. Hall advances towards us. Mr. Hall's shiny teeth show back. I could feel his eyes on me, it felt like looking at a calm shore. Except, you didn't notice the water pulling back, and it could become a tsunami.

"Charles Hall," Mr. Hall greets me, shaking my hand. I smile. "Mr. Courts, have you seen my wife?" Mr. Hall asks. Korbyn shakes his head.

"Ah, she was the lady in the red dress?" Mr. Hall nods, "No, last I saw her she was in the great hall with the ladies," Korbyn responds, making eye contact with me. I beam at Mr. Hall.

"She was in the garden with Kate, perhaps she's still there," I suggest.

"Yes, I still need to check with the others," Mr. Hall responds before walking off. He pauses as he comes across a certain pile of glass. "Mr. Courts, you've taken breaking into the art industry quite seriously?" Mr. Hall's voice was level with amusement. Korbyn snickers.

"Well Lennon here did but we alerted someone, it should be fixed soon," Korbyn rattles before locking eyes with me. Mr. Hall listlessly nods and begins trooping down the rest of the hallway. Korbyn's warm breath brushes my ear.

"I'll take care of the other two," he whispers. I nod before silently following after Mr. Hall. I take another step before my legs strap around his torso. My arms wrench around his neck. He attempts to yell but I cling to him. We plummet backwards. Sharp pain strikes through my spine. I clench my arms tighter. A rip reverbs in my ear. Hacks gag out from Mr. Hall's throat. He becomes motionless. I shoot up. Korbyn was jabbing at one of the bodyguards. The other still dragging his body through shaky consciousness. I seize my clutch. A smack rings out as it makes contact with the bodyguard's head. Korbyn tackles his bodyguard to the ground, crunching fists into the guard's face. A loud, "Oomph!" follows. Korbyn is pinned to the ground. My high heels dart across the carpet. I thrust my leg forward. The sharp part of my heel brushes against the bodyguard's ear. I hear a soft crack when the guard fumbles on Korbyn.

"Ow!" Korbyn snaps, pushing the bodyguard off. "Couldn't kick him out to the side?" he exclaims, glaring up at me. I reach my hand out.

"What matters is that he is out," I correct. Korbyn's soft hand takes mine and I hoist him up. His tie had become loosened, but his cream shirt and silver vest remained smooth and in order along with his face. He slides back on his overcoat and brushes out his trousers before his eyes slowly trace to my legs.

"So much for elegance," he derides, clearly aiming at my bottom half. I yank down the remaining untattered fabric past my knees.

"So much for Isabel Mantini," I frown.

"Who, the dress?" I nod. Korbyn sighs. He removes his overcoat.

"Might as well finish ripping it off," he encourages when we hear dress shoes drum against the carpet from not so far off. I tear off the rags of my dress. At that moment I decided silk was no longer my go-to for these events. However, I wrap the fabric around my knuckles. To quote Mrs. Hall:

It was a fitting dress.

Sharp bangs follow through my ears. Korbyn pounds the last bodyguard's face onto the clothed table. Blood drips from both Korbyn's nose and the bodyguard's face when he stops straggling. The bodyguard wallops on the ground. Korbyn snuffs, wiping his face, and tosses his brass knuckles on the clothed table nearby. They clang on the surface. I eye them dripping on the cloth, splotted with red.

"Seems like you want a mess," I nod my head towards the recently white dusty cloth. I take my broken heel from another bodyguard's loose hand. Pain shoots through my own leg. Korbyn hangs his head back.

"Putain," he groans nasally through shortened breaths. I reach inside my clutch laying on the carpet and hand him a tampon. He mumbles before pushing it up his nostril. I yank off my other heel. My foot drags along the floor before I sit on the edge of the clothed table. I smear gloss on my lips, feeling no tingles in my fingers. I snap it back in my clutch. My eyes travel along every crevice of it making sure no jewels have flung off. Korbyn glances at my shoeless feet, my left foot bigger than my right, before taking off his dress shoes. I take my right heel and turn it over. In the groove of the sole, I click the button beside the mini screen before it powers on.

T-minus 30 seconds

Is what I read on a message notification before I turn off the screen. I take up the broken heel next to me.

"The car is here."

When Korbyn opens the gold-framed doors we both make out the soft rumble of an engine. Seconds later shiny black wedge heels move along the carpet and I make eye contact with Lilith. Her blonde bun is as neat as her waitress suit barely rustled from the humidity. Other personnel stride in after her to round up the targets.

"Good work," she observes the handcuffed bodyguards in the corner. The bodyguard I hit with the vase is blinking slowly, taking in his comrades around him.

"And definitely not clean," I add. I gesture towards Korbyn. Lilith squints at his face letting out a giggle.

"It looks like it's working!" A rosy undertone arises on Korbyn's cheeks and he moves his hand away from the white string hanging out of his nose. He takes his brass knuckles in hand. I watch while the Halls are escorted out of the room. Mrs. Hall's groggy eyes widen at me but her slumped mouth can only move in shock. Mr. Hall, on the other hand, now had a full storm in his eyes. Just before he was about to flood the room with his words, Korbyn whispered in his ear. Mr. Hall's face drops and he's guided away towards the untouched doors. A few minutes later I slump against the cushioned Rolls Royce seat.

"Those shoes were nice," Korbyn remarks. He admires the sparkle of the heel straps laying on the seat next to me, the same straps that now held a marking on my toes. Korbyn yawns, tilting his head at me.

"We should get you kitten heels, it'll be more classy," Lilith mocks. She reaches inside the compartment beside her. I remove my foot from Korbyn's dress shoe and let her take it in hand. Soft fabric presses against my tender skin and I bite my lip. Lilith begins wrapping my foot.

"Please do, Mrs. Hall chewed off my ears with Louboutin," I groan, leaning back.

"Nothing wrong with kitten heels, they'll fit your feet perfectly." Korbyn's dimples appear. Lilith tucks in the remaining gauze.

"As perfect as that tampon," I smirk before resting my foot on the seat across from me.

"Yes, as perfect as the tampon," he mumbles. Laughter echoes, from Lilith and me before she crosses her arms. Silence then follows.

"It looks like we're doing jobs for International Courts now," she announces. Korbyn and I glance at one another before looking back at Lilith. Her hands fiddle with her pocket knife. "No more holo-calls from Blacksmith," she trails off.

“So that’s what was meant by decimation,” I ponder, locking eyes with Korbyn. A flash of doubt adorns his eyes before his eyebrows lower. I remember the jab that ran through my body as I read the Coalition Pact. It meant taking a mission to the irresolute legal extent; a license to kill. All are to be accorded possible allowance in five days. I shift my weight from one hip to another, leering at my foot. Taking another glance at them, his bloodied brass knuckles by my foot contrast his unsoiled overcoat, giving me goosebumps. This is a commitment to protecting another one’s life with more passion than your own.

“Yeah, they must do bullet points,” Korbyn leans back, “It’s like reading the dictionary.” I want to agree but I’d rather hold it against Korbyn. Lilith takes a soda from the mini fridge and hands it to me. A sigh leaves my lips. Finally, the throbbing pain along my skin turns into a cool ache. I exhale.

“Dictionaries don’t keep track of confidential matters,” I outface at Korbyn.

“Neither will we at the end of this,” he chides. We’ve all agreed to strike the downfalls of society with legal justice. We don’t need excess blood, it already stains our hands. Except I wouldn’t mind it, ever since my sisters’ blood covered my own I’ve been itching for a moment to replace it with their killer’s.

Student Name: Deborah Chung
Grade: 12
School: James E Taylor High School
Title: le chatelier's principle
Category: Poetry
Key: Silver Key
Educator:

le chatelier's principle states that
if a system at equilibrium
is subjected to a stress,
a shift will occur
to counteract the stress
and establish a new equilibrium.

an experiment is carried out
to test the principle's applicability
"it's only a simulation" of little consolation
but the - the reaction continues

dissolved substances: prepared ✓
colors & observations: documented ✓
procedure: add stress to the following equilibrium system
(test subject) in a moment of composure, and
note the effects

reaction proceeds as intended,
only - for the fabricated, filamented, fragments
of a person that i am,

a new equilibrium is never established

in an instant of clumsiness

(a drop, reversion & regression)

test tube glass slips from my hand,

shatters on the vinyl

spilling solution stains floor as

heart ruptures, contents overflow -

insecurities & mistakes & fears & shame

explosive fragility

on display

the glass flies

the lights give out

shards integrate

smoke envelops & overwhelms:

withering fibers of being

& a flailing, broken consciousness

on toward insanity

life is the experiment and the experiment is life

once more, i sink into

compulsive scribbles, sighs,

salt tear splatters on sheets of

chemistry homework at

half-past midnight

writing a composition on my decomposition,

i record the conclusion to my lab report:

le chatelier's principle does not hold true in the real world.

Student Name: Deborah Chung
Grade: 12
School: James E Taylor High School
Title: letter to my 10-year-old self
Category: Poetry
Key: Silver Key
Educator:

to the one who read "hope is the thing with feathers" in front of the fourth-grade class,

i'm writing to express my deepest apologies say i'm sorry.

i'm sorry i didn't become

your satisfactory self. i'm sorry for your inevitable disappointment.

hopes crushed — obliterated; i'd take you to the graveyard,

but you would hold your breath in fear, and i don't

have any to spare. i know i've let you down.

i'm sorry that it's too late. that life, in its essence, is

a distorted perception which has passed you by.

that "that's what i can do, what i'll be" is now nearly

obsolete. that you weren't able to smile & step bravely

into the future. that you didn't do __, go __, or become __,

& even your dying wish final request is out of reach at this point.

i'm sorry for breaking your wishes. i remember how

much you wanted to grow up, believing the implication of

"older" was calmness & confidence (that would bring

opportunity, validation, respect).

and you did. — become older. & discover the facade

of it all. i'm sure — if you could see me today, you would shred
your drawings visions of your future self,
notebooks scarred with long gashes like me, discarded
in a haste.

you would ask if there was anything you could do
to reverse it, to stop time please, please,
& eventually you would collapse in resignation.

screaming, wailing, saying you never
wanted to grow up, because you're too scared
of what the future holds. and in that moment,
you'd be me, desperately crying out
"i'll do anything" — forlornly hoping
for something to change, at last — giving up
exhausted it is what it is.

trust me, i know. i've been there.
it breaks my heart to break yours, but
for all your hope, you ended up as me.

even so, i don't hold it against you for having such dreams,
goals, expectations that i've fallen short of.
for lighting — likening — candle-wishes to aspirations of
relentless beacon flame & a fiery motivation,
mixing paint colors of achievement & necessity don't ever settle for less
creating a muddied incongruity,
unknowingly promising to make
your lifeblood worth its every drop unwasted,
longing to feel the heart swelling blood pump blossoming
in tune with

“i am proud of myself” —
ad astra, to the stars & to the fullest.
because, after all,
you were taught to hope, subject to constant
reminding of the potential you happened to possess,
instilled with the knowledge that your life was yours,
yours to shape, to be whatever you wanted
which you would interpret to mean living up to being the best
you could be. and i don’t hold that against you.
your standards were not impossible,
merely part of your birth defect manifest —
you were born with a brain in your head.
wired with an innate inclination toward exceptionalism
— the brain that made you you. tenacious, driven,
drove you to become me (the disintegrating life form
losing her breath & dwelling on the would’ve been,
could’ve been, should’ve beens). but it was not something you — or i
could ever control. it’s not your problem;
it’s mine not living up to and so, i’m sorry.

i’m sorry for extinguishing your blaze
with every snuffed-out candle, melted wax pooling
on every celebration of meaningless life,
deflating & popping the balloons you held onto
that would fly you to your ideal happy life,
letting your hopes crumble like grains of sand
like time (unit of measure years) through fingers
— the space between. in the end,

i'm sorry for ruining your aspirations &
not appreciating the moment of your being
flashing in transience, until fait accompli.

but i hope you know
that a trace of
the memory of you still exists in the form of
the smiling face framed on my refrigerator.
and i don't trace the lines & contours of your photograph
with the acceptance that you are [insert euphemism],
not fully enjoyed, fully realized, fully known. no,
in spite of it all, i imagine you as stellar.
celestial dust — specks, scintillae
& smatterings of the star you were, supernovae in dissolution
integrated into the broader macrocosm — infinity;
faded out of the realm of conscious thought
out of sight & out of mind unconstrained by what we know as
"human limitation" that has scrawled itself
all over my existence,
but still radiating presence
out there somewhere,
reaching over to me.

i hope you'll forgive me — someday,
somewhere outside of time. i hope this letter
never reaches you so you won't have to live
knowing you'll become me. and i know
it never will.

sincerely regretfully yours,
your future.

Student Name: Kendall Francis
Grade: 8
School: Adams Junior High School
Title: Missing
Category: Short Story
Key: Silver Key
Educator: Martinez Kelly D

Dear Maddy,

Hope your life is as normal as you wanted. I'm so happy you got the life you wanted. Your kids are so adorable and they have your eyes. You and Cole seem great together in y'all's small little cozy house. I wish life could've been different, but hey, everything happens for a reason. I haven't heard from you in a while. I get it, but just wanted to check in .

Love, Emily

"Maddy, let's go or we're going to be late. what are you doing?" My husband yelled.

"I don't know, just looking through some things. I found some old letters."

"Ok well you can look at it later.... We have to go or we'll be late!" Cole yelled from the kitchen.

"It's not that easy. We used to be best friends. You see, it all started when...."

"Emily, did your mom say yes to the party?" I asked.

"Ugh! I don't want to talk about it! She said no! We're going to the party! I'm sneaking out."

In the room that we grew up in, where we made all our childhood memories, was finally the place where we would be sneaking out to go to a party. Emily's parents may not be that strict but it's like they have eyes in the back of their head. They can detect a lie from a mile away, so Emily and I had to make sure we were on point the whole night. By the time we finally were able to say goodnight to her parents the party was about to start and we had to set up quickly. We spent the next hour creating our fake dummies to make it look like we were sleeping, but I couldn't shake the feeling that this isn't a good idea.

"Shhh, we don't want to wake them..." I whispered as we crept down the stairs.

"Don't worry, it's not my first rodeo." Emily whispered back. "We're out. Now let's go before the party's over."

As I got into my old rusty sedan, Emily couldn't have been more uneasy. That didn't make sense because it was her idea, but I thought it best to leave it alone.

"So are you meeting Cole at the party?" Emily asked.

"No, he can't go."

More like we were arguing about how I spend too much time with you and not him but I can't tell YOU that.

"Ohhh bumm- MADDY LOOK OUT!!!!!"

SCCCRRRRRTTTT!

I don't know what happened. There were flashing lights, police sirens, broken glass, but everything was a blur. The last thing I remember is Emily grabbing the wheel, but nothing was in front of us and then BLACK.

"Ms, I need you to wake up. Can you tell me your name? Were you alone?"

"M-my f-friend." I stuttered and then it went black again.

When I woke up I was in the hospital, everything was blurry.

"Hey, you were out for a while. How are you feeling? Does anything hurt?" The doctor asked me acting like he cared.\

"I'm F-fine. Where's my friend?"

"What do you mean? No one was with you."

"YES SHE WAS!" I yelled back.

Last thing I remember before it all went black again was the doctor yelling "Code Yellow" and then some nurse injected me with some ice cold substance. Then I was awake.

"Honey, oh thank goodness! They said you were in a wreck but only one girl was found in the vehicle! We were so worried! If you do something like that ever again you won't drive till I'm dead! Thank goodness you're ok!"

"Mom, where's Emily? She was in the car with me and now people are acting like she was never here!"

"They said there was no trace of her. She must've f-flew out."

"Honey why don't you get some rest, I-I'll talk to Emily's parents."

I tried to find any trace of hope in my mom's breaking voice, but there was none. I don't know what to think, I just want my bestfriend!!

The next few days were a fog of despair. Apparently, they said that they couldn't find a body, and Emily was later pronounced missing... then a few months later she was pronounced dead. Emily's parents have accepted that their daughter is gone, but I don't believe it. I mean, I can't bring myself to. A dead person can't just disappear off the face of the earth. I tried and tried to look for any glimpse of hope. From begging the police to keep searching for Emily, to realizing they're not looking so you have to try and find her yourself. Everything leads me to a dead end and now I'm starting to give up. There wasn't even blood on the seat and she was wearing her seatbelt. How does someone who always follows the rules, never breaks the law, and is the most loving person in the world have such bad luck. As it got farther and farther away from Emily's death, everyone seemed to move on. Even though everything proved Emily was dead, it doesn't mean I was ready to accept that.

"Maddy! Could you get the mail please?" My mom yelled, jerking me out of my daze."

"Ok, I'll be right there!" I yelled back from my dark dusty room not touched since the last time Emily was here.

Even though the mailbox is only down the street, it felt especially far today. All I want is to close my eyes and wake up from this nightmare. As I walked up to the vividly bright blue wooden mailbox, I sighed with relief. At least this hasn't changed. I walked back up to the house as I looked through the mail. Everything seemed normal until something caught my eye. It was a letter addressed to me from e m i l y. I didn't think, all I knew was I needed to open this letter. Until now, I haven't had any hope but finally this could be it.

Dear Maddy,

I know it's been a while and you're probably really shocked to be getting this letter but it's for the best....

Yeah, thinking your best friend is dead is definitely for the best.

I know these past couple days have been hard, but hopefully I can tell you more soon. Don't tell anyone I wrote to you. No one will get to see me, so I don't want to get their hopes up.

Love, Emily

I had been trying to hold everything in since Emily died but just reading her letter and hearing her voice in my head brings all the feelings rushing back. She said not to tell anyone, but I don't care. I will tell people, and we are going to find my best friend. She wouldn't abandon me on purpose, so I have to make sure she's ok.

"Mom, come quick! It's Emily! She wrote me a letter, and here it is!"

"Maddy, I thought we told you to move on. We all mi-"

I cut her off. "No, look it's right in my hand? Where is it? It was just here!"

"Maddy, this has to stop. You can't keep denying and lying to yourself. Emily is gone." Mom replied sympathetically.

I don't understand!? if the card was right here, where could it have gone? Emily please where are you?! As I kept getting letters from Emily over the past couple weeks, I tried and tried to tell my family she was alive, but they just called me crazy.

Now I'm here. In a dark lonely mental hospital because I'm out of my mind and crazy in the head. It's ridiculous really, and I hope I never get another letter from Emily again. She. Ruined. My. Life.

"Line up! Everybody out! Mail!" One of the doctors yelled, dragging me away from my lonely cell. "Roger, from your mom! Mathew's, from you sister! Francis!"

That was me. I wonder who would write.

"From some girl named Emily!"

Great, the one person I didn't want to write to me did. She better have some great reason for ruining my life!

Dear Maddy,

The things I want to say to you can't be said in a letter which is why I haven't told you. Well, 'till now. You see, the night that we went to a party I had been doing some research on supernatural beings which got me into quite the ordeal. Anyway it turned out weird I guess. I never wanted any of this to happen, from you thinking I'm dead, to now you being in a mental hospital. Everything I didn't want to happen, happened. I don't know if I will ever be able to see you again but it's for the best. I will keep writing to you to make sure you're okay. I love you and always will. Anyway, the reason I haven't been there is because I am a...

"FRANCIS! Times up, give me that letter!"

“No please I haven’t finished reading it! Plea..”

The next thing I knew she grabbed the letter out of my hand and ripped it to pieces. 1st rule: when mail time is over, it’s over. My one chance to finally know if Emily is okay, is gone, and I don’t know if I’ll ever get another.

Student Name: Aanisah Chiedozie
Grade: 8
School: Morton Ranch Jr High School
Title: One Day; He Will Learn
Category: Poetry
Key: Silver Key
Educator: Brian Branks

He's tried.

He spilled tears in her embrace and begged for comfort.
She pushes him away with a weary sigh, muttering apologies.
Not caring enough to even look up from the piles of paper on her desk.

He's tried.

He's softly voiced feelings of fear and insecurity, pleading silently for assurance
She only rubbed his shoulder, chuckling telling him to "man up"
The words offered him meaningless endurance
"You're acting like a girl, son"
Girls are weak, he's learned, but their words still hurt.

He lacks empathy.

He doesn't how to spout words of comfort or
wrap his hands around their body whispering sweet nothings.

His heart is an empty void, emotions around him get sucked in and spat back out.

He's not sure what to do with them.

Comforting someone so deeply, even if their eyes still pool with tears,
their heart sings a light song of relief.

He doesn't know how to feel for others, let alone himself.

Tears are nothing but a warning sign to him.

A caution sign telling him to not get too close, before he falls into the
trap of repetitive apologies.

The words, "I'm sorry" are so empty, a whisper of apology,
hollow and meaningless.

Why would he put on someone else's shoes when he
has shoes of his own?

He says what he wants and he moves on with his life

It was their fault for venturing too close and getting punished by the poison on his
tongue.

Until he realized people get affected by his words because they are his.

He simply talks and hopes no one gets entangled in his words.

He spits out phrases of venom and watches
as they bubble and melt on their skin.

Who is he to release his words like bullets and casually turn as if he wasn't the one to pull
the trigger?

They turn away from him, spitting words of distaste.

He remains isolated, he looks around and no one cares to meet his eyes.
A lighthouse sitting on an empty shore, shining, and waiting. For anyone.

He's only acting the way he knows how.
He learned a long time ago, that just being himself wasn't enough.

He's sorry.

To the little girl, he said horrible things about,
then scoffed and shrugged when he saw the frown melt onto her face

He apologizes.

For who is he to utterly shatter her self-esteem,
and feign ignorance, as if he is unaware.

To shrug and scoff as if he does not care.

He promises he does.

He cares so much that he doesn't know what to do with it.
He saw tears roll down their cheeks, his shoulders slumped and his heart grew heavy.
It rattles in his chest, overwhelmed with entirely new emotions.

He opens his mouth to spill a meaningless apology, before turning and walking away.

He's always isolated.

He learned a long time ago that's how it always will be.

He lacks empathy.

He doesn't know how to spout words of comfort or
wrap his hands around their body whispering sweet nothings.

But so help him, God, he will gain it.

He will learn, not all apologies are meaningless.

He will learn, not every word he thinks must breach reality and spill from his mouth.

He will learn, that one day he will be enough.

He will learn, one day he will be kind.

He will learn, one day isolation will be an emotion of the past.

Today he learned, that he lacks empathy.

Identifying the root is the beginning of recovery.

A small ember of hope, that one day.

His apologies will not fall short.

Student Name: Nimi Adeleye
Grade: 8
School: Adams Junior High School
Title: Peer Pressure
Category: Personal Essay & Memoir
Key: Silver Key
Educator: Alex Wissen

...Peer pressure.

Peer pressure is a silent killer, an untraceable poison, an incurable disease. You never know how it's really affected you until one day— the regret hits you like a freight train. The regret that everything you used to love was morphed into pure, unfiltered hate. The ridicule of others will push you to do anything. Your talent, snuffed like a midnight candle. If only- If only you could go back in time and tell yourself otherwise, say, "Don't listen to them. Just be yourself." But it's much too late now, and you've already lost your love, your drive, and your confidence. All to a few words. I've only begun to realize how it's affected me now. I look back and see that peer pressure has been in my life even when I didn't notice. My first encounter with peer pressure was in school.

In the second week of my fourth year in elementary school, a boy I'd never even talked to came up to me and asked me a question that, if we were any older, would have embarrassed me.

"So, who do you like?"

Of course, not even being ten yet, I had no answer and responded accordingly. The one thing I should've known is that at that age, no-one would take the word 'No' as an answer. In the following days, multiple people came up to me to ask the same question. I followed with the same answer to all— until one day, I started to notice the disdainful looks from my peers. Their looks of abhorrence started becoming more and more apparent as the days passed. One day, it clicked. All of this was for my indifference towards their questions. I easily picked up on their reactions, and eventually realized their actions were because of my own obliviousness. I noticed the fact that everyone seemed to have a 'special someone'. I didn't.

A fear enveloped my heart. A fear I now recognize. The fear of being different. A primal, almost instinctual fear flooded through my veins at that very moment and clouded my

judgment, and I decided that making up a crush was a better choice than allowing myself to be ostracized. The next day, I chose a random kid in my class to have a 'crush' on. I used it as an excuse for anyone who asked me that dreaded question. The only thing I didn't take into consideration was the possibility that the kid I had claimed was my crush would find out. Another thing I didn't take into consideration was the possibility of any "feelings" being reciprocated.

A few days later, a group of people crowded around me, claiming that 'someone' had something to say to me. They had made it seem like an urgent matter, so I waited. The same boy I had used to avoid their questions had come up to the crowd that encircled me, pushing past others to reach me. One thing led to another, and the boy was confessing his feelings. I felt like I had been dropped in the tank of hungry sharks with nothing but a floatie to keep me safe. The same feeling from before— the fear, the need to fit in, came back in full force. I peered around at the eager faces of the crowd, and uttered a single sentence.

"Sure, I'll be your girlfriend."

I said yes. I would have never been able to predict what followed. A purely parasitic relationship in which my time, confidence, and self-worth were all taken and destroyed. By the end of the year, I'd barely recognized what I had become. A shell of my former self. I had morphed into a shy and quiet girl, a stark contrast to the loud confidence I had displayed earlier in the year. It took me two years to build back any semblance of confidence back. Every day, I think back and wonder, 'What if I had said no?'

The next year, I moved schools.

Two years later after the incident, I had entered the sixth grade, my confidence in bloom, and the fear of not fitting in no longer plaguing my mind. It would have been a good year. It should have been a good year. Until I experienced first hand how mean people could be. It seemed like everyone had a meeting to come to a general consensus— to become infinitely more judgemental to those around them. My invite must have gotten lost in the mail.

Unknowingly, I had attracted a small group of detractors, finding a tall, black, admittedly nerdy girl an easy target. Although I didn't know these people, they knew me. You're never really invisible when you're seven inches taller than everyone else. These people had seemingly made it their personal mission to make my life unbearable. From various verbal assaults, to sticking things into my hair, to physically pushing me into different things. It all came to a head in November of that year. I was sitting in my seventh period when I heard whispers behind me. Whispers about my hair., about how it looked weird. A token I had once prided myself on was being meticulously broken down by the two girls

behind me. It affected me more than I'd like to remember. I quickly began to hate my hair, hate how it looked, hate how it made me look. I slowly began to start to check my hair at random times. It eventually evolved into always checking how it looked in fear that someone would secretly be ridiculing something about it.

By the end of the week, I'd begged my mom to get it redone. When she asked where this was coming from, as I had 'loved it a week ago', I stayed silent. 'Snitching' would lead to ridicule worse than being bullied. I would be labeled a snitch, another thing that would make me different. The next week, I came back with a fresh, different hairstyle that I admittedly hated. It was too tight on my head and made me feel and look ridiculous. The girls who had talked about my hair before seemed to love it, though. As long as it stopped those comments, I would let it happen. Even now, almost three years later, I can't diverge from the norm in fear of retaliation and embarrassment. I wear the same hairstyle that I was forced into those three years ago. Everyday, I think, 'What if I had more of a backbone?', and more importantly, 'What if I had told anyone what was going on?'

In the seventh grade, I was forced into telling a lie. I was witness to academic dishonesty in one of my classes, but I'd kept silent as it did not concern me. The next day, when people started getting pulled into the office, rumors spread.

"If you get called in, say that nobody was doing anything yesterday.," people would whisper.

I did not care much for it. At the time, it didn't concern me. It didn't concern me until the second day of interrogation when I was called in to tell my version of what happened. The second my name was called to go to the office, one of the more 'popular' kids in my class called me over.

"Hey, you're not going to tell on us, right?" he whispered, I stayed silent. "Right?" he said, louder now. I could almost feel everyone's eyes on me.

"Yeah, I won't." I whispered

I didn't tell the principal the truth that day, but I ended up not having to. Someone else did. A small boy with glasses had told the principal everything that had happened. When word got out about who had 'snitched' the boy was completely ostracized from everyone

else. After that day, I couldn't even remember seeing anyone talking to him. I'm just glad it wasn't me, even though I know it was wrong. But- what if I had told them what happened? What if I stood firm, and didn't fold when ordered to keep silent? Would I have ended up like that boy?

Most recently, in my last year of middle school, I quit playing my instrument of four years- the cello, because of the immense ridicule it'd caused me to endure in my three years of middle school. Constant verbal assaults, teasing and scorn had caused me to harbor a deep hatred for an instrument I once loved. I slowly slipped out of my rhythm, and began to forget that it even existed. By the end of the year, I had quit caring about it at all. I had lost all love for my instrument. Practicing became a chore, playing became a necessary evil, rehearsals felt like a chore instead of a need. By the time we were playing at our winter concert, my personal cello had begun to build up dust in my practice room. I had quit trying, so it was no surprise that by the end of the year, I had quit the program entirely.

Last night, I picked up my retired instrument. I had only returned to it to make sure there were no problems before returning it, when an aching part of me yearned to play just one last time. That night, I found that I could barely even hold the instrument properly, let alone play it. Four years of my life seemed to crumble to dust at that moment. I had lost all my talent, love and confidence in my instrument. I couldn't bring myself to play it a second time.

That night, I couldn't help but cry over the loss. Memories of when I was still good at the cello consumed my brain. It eased into a train of thought that shone a light on the decisions that I had let others make for me. It'd left me shocked at how much I had let other people's opinions, words, and feelings affect how I think. Maybe if I had stayed true to myself and said no, I would be able to look at myself in the mirror without feeling disgusted. Maybe if I had stayed true to myself, and ignored other people's words, I would be styling my hair however I want. Maybe, if I hadn't let others' opinions of me change how I saw myself, I would still be playing the cello.

Last night, I realized, I'm not really myself. Just someone who looks like her.

Student Name: Abbie Vijay
Grade: 10
School: Obra DTompkins High School
Title: shoes
Category: Poetry
Key: Silver Key
Educator:

in his room were dozens of shoes,
yet no two were alike:
some big,
some small,
some smooth,
some rough,
some hard,
some soft,
each in a different color:
reflective silver or neon orange,
blood red or baby blue –
but all old and frayed.

tearing at the seams,
worn down by constant use and eventual disuse,
as they lay shoved in the usual spaces:
the small corner of the closet,
the space between his bed and the wall,
well-hidden from his mother's stern gaze.

her long, slender fingers would gently hold his hand

while she threw away the footwear,
one by one,
reprimanding him for collecting such junk.
there would be new shoes after all,
as he had long outgrown them –
perhaps a wonderful electric blue
or an adventurous yellow.
with a new structure,
a new shape,
a new pattern

his mom drives to the store every year to buy a new pair,
each different from the last,
but he tries to throw them away,
refusing to replace his past shoes;
each connected with an era,
a new adventure.

but every year he gives in,
he tries the new pair.
it fits differently,
it feels strange,
it looks unfamiliar –
he feels like he wants to vomit
all over the smooth, tractionless floor of the car –
it doesn't know how it feels
for time, for memories
to be pulling you back,

the carpet gripping on to you,
shocking you with every step.

yet, at the end of each year,
he finds himself attached to them,
he holds them in his hands and tries them on again,
disappointed his foot doesn't fit anymore.
he hurls the now old shoes
into the closet with tremendous force,
with blood-red rage,
neon orange radiating
as his mind highlights
what could have been,
what should have been.

but quickly, he is filled with soft, baby blue sadness
and silver reflection
as he eyes the shoes in the closet,
as he lets them stay there forever,
mourning the fact that the shoes will never fit again,
that he will never have those memories again,

but, unbeknownst to him,
from then on
the yellowish glow,
the electric blue thoughts
the tints of his past soles
would faintly light his steps,

following him
despite each new year,
and each new pair –
their whispered memories,
always there.

Student Name: Grace Ding
Grade: 10
School: Obra DTompkins High School
Title: StainedTies
Category: Personal Essay & Memoir
Key: Silver Key
Educator: Kelly Moore

Left, right. Left, right. My heart thump-thumps wildly as my feet slam the glossed tile. My lungs engulf the air in front of me. I look back, see the flash of neon yellow, and fling my searing feet forward, faster.

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15 minutes earlier

"M-oom, they have nothing like this in America!" I exclaim, stretching out my O's. My eyes lock onto the racks of multi-colored pens and stacks of silk paper notebooks. I tug at my mom's cuff, pointing at the stationary store just an escalator away.

Her eyes don't meet mine. They're glued to her brightly-lit phone screen.

Streams of sunlight flood into the mall and reflect off the white tiles to illuminate the shops. The beams hug my face and bake into my skin. Kids and adults pack the escalators, chatting about their new finds, clutching plastic bags stuffed with winter coats and earmuffs. The screeching food court chairs, the rustling shopping bags, and the bellowing laughter of families floods my ears and swamps my senses. The scuff-scuffling of my brother's sneakers directs my gaze to the floor.

"Don't you want to shop for legos with your brother? We're all leaving now," my mom says, her voice slicing through the afternoon clamor.

"Legos? Really?" I raise an eyebrow, "You know I'm way too old for that."

“Whatever, just go to that stationary store. You never stick with the family anyways.”

Mom never shared my thrill for books or love for learning. Instead, she held a silent grudge against each tinge of excitement a fresh page of notes or riveting story chapter brought me, occasionally urging me to prioritize family.

I ignore her and make my stride up the escalator, clenching the smooth, ink black surface of the escalator’s handrail with my clammy hands. Pressing the left pocket of my jeans, I double-check that the stiffness of my allowance, a ¥500 bill, is still there. I feel it sitting heavy in my back pocket, itching to dart out.

I scramble into the store and take in the hundreds of colors—aubergine, cerulean, iris – hues beyond my imagination. Rows and rows. Notebooks fill the next aisle, silky paper linked together by copper-taped spines. Ergonomic pencils rest on the top shelf, shaker pencils right below.

My eyes widen as a glint of gold pulls me toward it. A shiny fountain pen lay with its companion— a tiny pot of ink, dark navy like the midnight sky.

I pick the pen up, tugging the gold cap off. Floral patterns weave into the pen’s side. The embroidered “24k” on the clip flashes and blinks at me.

“I don’t even wanna know how much this is,” I murmur to myself.

I spot the small plaque standing next to the ink labeled “1500 ¥” (~\$200 USD), and my eyes widen. Lowering the pen back on its stand, a cold surface nudges my elbow. I heard it first. The shattering shriek of the glass. The tiny glass pot—the gold pen’s partner in crime—sits on the floor broken into tinier pieces, each one writhing in pain, the fishy tang of ink stinging my nostrils. The dark blue pools below me and slithers into the cracks of the tiles, poisoning the white floor with its venom. Crap.

An employee's scorching eyes draw my gaze up from the ground, his jet black hair shining like the slick scales of a viper. My heart shivers.

Can I even afford this pen? What if he doesn't understand me in English? Can I get sued for this? Can I get arrested for this? What would my mom do if she was here?

I bolt. Away from his evil eyes. Away from his heinous hair. Past the oceans of pens and the endless abyss of mechanical pencils. From the corner of my eye, I see the glint of gold. Its piercing tip glares at me.

After just a few paces, the clink-clinking of metal keys smashing together lures me to turn around. A buff man charges towards me, neon yellow vest hugging his torso. With each step, his sneakers pound on the floor and with each abrupt turn, they screech on the glossed tiles. Foreign words race to tumble out of his mouth and into the air. I don't know what he's saying. I don't know if I want to.

I turn back and continue to hurl one foot in front of the other, stretching my limbs as far as they can go. My trembling arms wildly swing as I grab onto the corner of a wall to whip myself forward with momentum. I gape for air, lips quivering, jaw aching.

The glass dome looms as I sprint below its shadow, the curved panes like the bloated underbelly of a giant monster. Dense clouds congest the sky, their figures sticking together in clumps. Faint rays of sunlight press against the clouds' bloated forms, filtering through in thinstreams. The twilight sky holds a foreboding glow, captured in the awkward phase between drizzling and storms.

My heart hammers against my ribs, keeping tempo with the slap of my sneakers against marble.

Why did I run? How would my mom react? If I were caught, I was surely never going to be trusted alone again. Adrenaline and alarm color my vision and muddle my mind as I hear the security guard's keys jangling a distance away.

Running past a bakery, the syrupy warmth quickly blankets me, offering comfort with notes of cinnamon toast and hot coffee. Giving the mall one sweeping stare to make sure I'm safe, I slink inside of the bakery.

A nice warm croissant should cool me down, I think to myself, spotting the display case filled with delights. I reach into my pocket to pull out some cash, but — nothing. Nothing is in my right pocket. I fumble through my left pocket to double-check, and find old post-it notes and wrinkled gum wrappers, but no cash.

I retrace my steps. Anywhere but in the store, I plead in my head. I count out the bakery, the escalator, the bench— with only one shop left.

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Trudging back into the stationary shop, I spot my mom examining my favorite pens. She was hoping to surprise me with stationary for my upcoming birthday, which is why she discouraged me from the store in the first place.

I sheepishly look down the rows of pens, avoiding eye contact with any store associate. Their colors seem damper than before, like an old washed out photograph. I scan the notebook aisle, locking eyes with a propped open A5 Kokuyo Campus notebook. The icy pages are cold and seething. I see my mom turn around and make her way towards the register when I pull her wrist back.

"Mom— please don't go up there. I did something really bad. They might make you pay." I scream-whisper, the guilt still sitting like a sack of hot coals burning through my stomach.

"What did you do this time?," she scoffs, her face twisting into a disapproving stare— eyebrows scrunched, lips firmly pressed into a downturned line.

I used to panic at my mom's disapproving glare every time she flashed it when I was younger. And then I got used to it, doing enough troublesome things to prompt the stare almost every day. But it still hurt.

"I broke a really expensive ink pot," I say, tears pricking my eyes. "I didn't know what to do, ran away, got chased by a security guard, lost all my allowance. I messed up bad."

"How much was the pot?"

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She scolds me for almost half an hour, mainly for the fact that I ran away after breaking the pot. After forcing me to apologize to both the security guard and the store associate, she decides to pay for the pot using my reserved birthday money. But as she hands her card to the store associate, I see the slightest crinkle of an amused smile.

Student Name: Megan Tran  
Grade: 8  
School: Adams Junior High School  
Title: Stolen Heart  
Category: Short Story  
Key: Silver Key  
Educator: Brittany Setzekorn

You step into the roaring auditorium, triumphantly. Today was the day; the day the whole world learned the gut wrenching truth. You had been wanting, waiting for this moment. Shakily, you step onto the platform. Before you can speak, an outstanding applause captivates you.

“Hello,” you breathe. There were at least ten thousand eyes watching you, but today you feel fearless. “My name is Liana Tralosa, and my brother, Tanner, was declared dead six months ago.

\*\*\* One Year Earlier \*\*\*

“Liana, GET UP,” your mother yells through the door. You drag yourself up, the chilled air attacking your once warm body. You open your windows to see a colossal snow pile outside. Normally, you would be ecstatic, but today you’re concerned. Too much snow makes it hard to get to school, and Reykjavik has snow so often, your school thinks you should be able to “handle it”.

After getting dressed, you head downstairs to see your siblings all ready. Allison, your older sister, is dressed in a red plaid coat with a short black dress under it; Jeni, your younger sister, has a long, navy, knitted dress on. They both look beautiful, and you immediately feel underdressed in your jeans and sweater. As you start to think of a special occasion you might’ve forgotten, your brother’s name echoes through the house.

“Tanner! Why did you get a fifty-six on an English test?” You look up to see your twin brother, Tanner, dressed in jeans with a dress shirt, panicking. Mortified, Tanner looks at you pleadingly. You know that it’s his problem, but he’s saved you countless times.

“Mom,” you start to call.

“He’s fine! Leave the boy out of your miserable life.” Your dad’s voice booms through your house. Immediately you know what to do, leave. Allison looks over at you as you grab your car keys. Frantically, she whisper-yells at Jeni to gather her stuff and get into the car.

Practically running, you slam your house door, still hearing your parents’ arguing voices. Tanner jumps in the backseat next to Jeni as Allison tosses her backpack in your

car's trunk. You start the engine and count heads. You count four and slam on the gas. Speeding down the block, you stop at your school. Silence engulfs your car's atmosphere.

It's normal. That's what you tell yourself. That parents fighting doesn't just happen in your family. That other people's parents fight too. You replay this morning in your head. Before you know it, Allison guides all of y'all out of your car. The car you got this year when you turned sixteen. It was a present from both of your parents, before any fighting.

As you walk into school, you run into your bestfriends. "Did it happen again?" Emily looks you in the eyes sympathetically. You nod.

"Need to come over to my house?" Taylor offers.

"I'm ok," you look at your locker. It's decorated with your favorite family photos. "Yea, no I'm fine."

"Ok, if you're sure." Taylor smiles, and she and Emily walk to their classes. You wish you were an only child like each of them sometimes, but you love all your siblings. Tanner, who was the reason your parents got into a fight this morning, is still your twin brother, and you love him.

You walk into your first period. It's calculus, but today instead of thinking about math, all you can think about is your parents. Before you can even snap back to reality, the last bell does it for you. As you head to your locker, a hand tugs your braid backwards. "You know you're very bad at hiding your emotions." It's Taylor, and she gives you her look that always reminds you of a teacher. "I'm serious," she says as you mock her. "If you need, my house is always open."

"That," you pause. You know your mind needs a break from your home, but you can't leave your siblings alone-especially Tanner. "Is a great offer, but I am okay today," you lie. Taylor shrugs and walks off. You take a deep breath and walk to your car.

When you get there, Allison has already turned on her punk rock in your car. You shake your head as she belts out every word. You turn to see Tanner in the back smiling next to Jeni, who has no idea what's happening. You smile and head home.

As you pull up in your driveway, you feel an unsettling feeling crawling in your stomach. You slow down and turn off the engine.

When you walk in, there are glass shards covering your floor, cracks lying in your counters, and... And an eerie silence that forces the hairs on your neck to stand up.

"NOOO!" Your head whips around to see nothing but tracks that only your mom's shoes could've made. As you take a step toward the noise and tracks, Jeni slips her smally, ice cold hand into yours.

While you inch nearer to the place where the unnerving scream came from, you hear a light shuffling. “Mom,” you say as you see your mother sitting on the floor, ripping family photos. “Stop!” You scream and rip the picture out of her hands. She looks up at you with tearstained eyes.

“Why do you care!” she spats. “Me and your father are done!” Your face drains color as Jeni starts to cry. No! The, -No! She’s lying! You refuse to believe her. Although you want to run away, you stumble back and sprint up the stairs. As you sprint up the steps, you hear Jeni’s voice bawling downstairs. Even though you know you should be the older sibling, you can’t turn back. You slam your door shut just to hear light footsteps on the stairwell.

“Liana, can I come in?” Tanner cracks the door open and peeks, his hazel hair almost covering his eyes. You try to speak, but all that comes out is a frustrated sob. “Hey, it’s ok.”

“NO! This, this,” your brain searches for the words. “This is your fault!” He looks taken back and falls. “If you, you... AHH! GET AWAY!” Tanner scrambles to his feet, his face with yours. Anger is fuming through you.

“I... I, I’m sorry.” He looks genuine, but you’re furious. You slam the door in his face and sob on your bed.

\*\*\* Next Day \*\*\*

BEEP! Your alarm startles you awake. The night before feels like a distant dream to you. When you look in the mirror, you see the wreck your parents created. You feel like a mess.

The day drags by, but soon the day is done. By the time you get to your car, Jeni is in the back sleeping, Allison is reading, and Tanner is... Tanner’s not there. “Where’s,” you pause. You know you screwed up yesterday, but you’re not great with your emotions. “Where’s Tanner?”

“He’s not with you?” Allison turns to you, her face covered in confusion.

“Uh...” She looks impatient, so you tell her about your fight with him last night. While you start to explain, tears start to slip from your eyes.

“Liana,” anger fills up Allison’s voice, but instead she tells you, “it’s ok. We will find him.”

“He’s gone, and it’s all my fault!” She hugs you. When you put your hands on the steering wheel, they start shaking.

“I’ll drive,” Allison offers.

The whole car ride is silent as you try and pull yourself together. You know your parents will be mad, but you already miss Tanner. Even though you keep calling and texting him, your phone has no new notifications.

When you pull into your driveway, Allison grabs Jeni while you walk in. You take a deep breath. As soon as you see your parents your stomach twists into a knot. Your mouth starts spilling everything before your brain can comprehend. They look at you, but instead of yelling, they just apologize for their behavior. "We can call the police, ok?" You nod, staying silent.

"We'll find him!" The police officer, who your parents called, walks out of your house with ten other officers following him. After they leave, your mother tells you to try and get some rest, so you listen and go upstairs.

You wake up at three AM to hear an official sounding voice talking. "We haven't found him yet." Yet means that they're still looking for Tanner. Okay, it's ok. You drift back to sleep.

When you wake up, all you can think about is Tanner. Soon enough, each day merges with the next, and you can't tell days apart. All you hope to hear is that he's home, but Tanner isn't.

\*\*\* Six Months Later \*\*\*

Six months have passed and they still can't find him. Your mom takes you to a court after school. Confused, you just follow her. Inside, a voice echoes through the room. "I apologize, but today we declare Tanner Tralosa dead." WHAT! no, No, NO! You look up at your mom who stands there unfazed, like she's already moved on. Fine, I'll find him.

The next day at school, the news spreads like wildfire. Soon, Taylor comes up to comfort you. "I know you're not good." You smile at her as she reaches out to hug you. You lean on her shoulder and cry. You tell her everything that's ever crossed your mind. When you tell her your plan to find him, she looks at you with a widening smile.

"Of course you can help," you sniffle. Suddenly, it feels like a weight has been lifted, and you are thankful to have a best friend who can always make you feel better.

At lunch, you decide to talk to Tanner's friends to ask if they ever thought he was acting weird that day. "Nah, not really. He was really upset about you or somethin'." You stop breathing and feel your throat close.

"Let's go." Taylor tries to pull you away, however your feet are planted in the ground. Taylor tugs harder which you're thankful for. You can't think about your fight one more time. You leave the cafeteria and go and interview teachers. None of them even remotely help you, so now you're back where you started. Taylor takes you home because there is no one helping you at your school.

“Ugh! I already miss him,” you say when you arrive at your house. Taylor gives you a sympathetic look. You smile at her because she’s the only reason you’re not falling apart.

“Well I have to go, but I’ll ask my cousin if we can see Tanner’s phone. Oh! And maybe, he’ll let me interview him. Sounds good?” You nod, and she walks away. You hear her say bye to your dad and the door close, right before you collapse and cry. And cry, and cry, and cry. You cry until sleep encaptures you.

The next day is gloomy. Gloomy here meant light rain to pouring rain in two hours. You start to get out of bed when you hear your phone ring. You run to your bedside post where your phone lives. “Taylor?” you say as you read the name. Hope runs through your veins that she will have anything to help you.

“I have his phone, Tanner’s! And my cousin did the interview!” She squeals loud as usual, and her face becomes an image in your head. The image of your best friend of nine years, forces your face to burst into a smile. “I’m in my car on the way now!”

“Uh, ok.” She hangs up, and you decide you need to clean your room. You look around; your eyes stopping on a photo of you and Tanner when y’all were kids. You inch closer to the photograph. The closer you get, the more details you see. Tanner’s hazel hair, long before he cut it. Your pale blue eyes looking at him...

“Hey!” Taylor’s voice cutting through your thoughts. You pivot around to see her holding his phone and a piece of paper. Taylor plops on your bed, so you sit next to her. She hands you the phone, and you open it easily. It was your birthday, the one you shared with Tanner.

While you check his apps, Taylor explains her interview with her cousin. “So they found... he was like... and you would think... right?”

“Uh huh,” you nod, but you just scroll faster through the phone. Taylor keeps talking. You nod, pretending to agree. “Wait, look.” You show her Tanner’s notes on his phone.

“What’s that?” She points to the seven character combination.

“It’s our ticket to finding him.” You look over at her confused face. A proud smile takes your face as you explain that it’s a license plate number. Still, she looks at you like questions are invading her head, so you decide to take her to the DMV instead.

“Mom, me and Taylor are going to the DMV!” You yell out, but you don’t hear a response. You head out though, not wanting to waste time.

When you get there, a man calls you over. “How can I help you ladies?”

“Well, um, we’re uh, looking for a car. Can you help us?”

“Course madam. What’s the plate number?”

"GYAT490." He turns to his computer and starts to type. His typing fills your brain with all sorts of possibilities. Could Tanner be alive? Could he be dead- no he's alive. Yea, alive...

"So ma'am," his voice startles you back to reality. "This car is a Toyota 4RUNNER, in... uh, in Hofn." The man finishes, stuttering unsure of his answer. When you look at Taylor confounded, she is pale. Her face, drained of color, turns to you, afraid.

"Are you sure Liana?" Although you're not sure, you nod.

"I am."

"Your funeral," says the guy. You turn to him and glare.

"Thanks," is all you say before you grab Taylor's arm and leave.

The next day at school bores you, but you manage to find out that Hofn is known for mysteries and kidnapping. I wonder if Tanner was kidnapped. The image of your brother trapped sends you shuddering.

Your car's engine rumbles off when you get home. You get out and walk into your house. On the couch on opposite sides, sit your parents. They pat the area in between them. Nervously, you sit down. When you do, they stare at each other and take a deep breath. "Liana, you need to stop." What?! "We don't want our hopes up." You look at your dad who just shattered your heart with eleven words. Can he be serious? You look at your mom who just nods.

"No, yea NO! I love my brother and I won't give up on him like you." You stare at them, fuming. They look careless, so you storm right out of the door.

"Taylor, hey yea. I'm leaving now." You hang up. You look outside of your car's window and step on the gas.

When you get to Taylor's house, she's standing outside waiting for you. You leave for Hofn the moment she sits in the car. As you take off, Taylor explains that the car is at a gas station.

You find the car and walk into the gas station. The owner, Bill, says no one has used the car in seven months. Tanner went missing seven months ago! You walk towards the car and open it, surprisingly. Before you can explore it, a note slips to the ground. You pick it up and read it to Taylor. "It says: LIANA STOP LOOKING!"

"Um, that's creepy." Taylor looks at you. Your breath catches, and you start panicking. "Maybe we should stop-"

"No," you cut Taylor off. "I'm going to find him." You walk back into the gas station filled with fake confidence. "I need to see your surveillance cameras."

After seeing that the car usually returns to one house, you and Taylor drive there. "Should we call the police?" Taylor asks when you arrive. You nod.

As you step out of the car, Taylor has the police on her phone. You knock on the door. Nobody answers. You try the door and it's unlocked. You turn back to Taylor and she shrugs. You take a few steps in and see Tanner sitting, tied to a chair.

"Tanner!" You scream and rush to his side. "OMG, OH MY GOD! You're alive!" You hug him so hard he squeaks.

"Liana! You found me!" You smile as tears drip down your face. Before you can untie him, a pair of strong arms rip you away. You look to see a man who's followed by police officers. You try to scream, but nothing but sobs escape your mouth. He's alive! Suddenly someone picks you up. You look up to see Taylor, her braces glinting. You give her a hug as you hear handcuffs opening. You try to relax a little.

\*\*\* Five Months Later \*\*\*

Cameras flash in your face as you try to explain. "Yes, David McCullenly will be imprisoned for the kidnapping of Tanner Tralosa, my twin brother. He will also receive treatment for thinking Tanner was his dead son. And yes, Tanner is safe. Yes, I found him with the help of my best friend Taylor, so yes." You answer thousands of questions, but your face is still covered in a blanket of happiness. You found your brother, and you will never yell at him again.

I

Love

You,

Tanner...

Student Name: Deborah Chung  
Grade: 12  
School: James E Taylor High School  
Title: summer 20/20  
Category: Poetry  
Key: Silver Key  
Educator:

they said i needed to open my eyes  
my vision wasn't 20/20  
they said i needed exposure  
my senses were deteriorating  
they said i couldn't hide away  
in my own little corner of the world  
so i fell in  
in step with their wishes, desires, commands  
escaped but not unscathed;  
impressionable mind tainted  
by a harsh rationalemotionality

i'm only 14

even if lost in thought,  
i could never drown it out  
the television blared  
reruns of the daily downer:

disease. discrimination. injustice.  
intolerance. riots. protests.

brutality. conflict. violence.

this. is. reality.

for the first time

i heard

so many voices

so much dissonance

grating sandpaper scrape,

salt on wounds

how far is too far?

i'm only 14

i can't go through this

i shouldn't have to be brought into this

left to drown in crushed contemplation

with no light switch for the world

and a mind clawing itself apart:

question everything

the most memorable are the most remembered

i don't know what to believe, who to trust

(not even myself)

i fundamentally disagree with everyone

i get along with no one

this shouldn't be -

introspection falters simultaneously realizing

a broken object may be mended

but never quite restored to its original state

i'm only 14  
the other 14-year-olds don't have to  
grapple with these issues every night  
and on top of -

now (ir)reversibly scarred,  
questions knot together forming a matrix  
black holes and voids interspersed  
welcome to wonderland:  
the inescapable reality  
enmeshing,  
strangling,  
suffocating,  
waking  
up screaming  
caught  
in suspended animation  
or falling  
or dying  
it's been like this as early as  
14 minus 10 i've never  
told anyone and this and this  
merely exacerbating -

i - that summer  
i was only 14  
when -

[voice cuts out]

Student Name: Polina Metserytsian

Grade: 8

School: Adams Junior High School

Title: Sweet Revenge

Category: Short Story

Key: Silver Key

Educator: Kim Crandall

Gun up. Trigger Pulled. Shot Fired.

I walk up to Theo and pushed away his chocolate brown hair covering his dark green eyes.

With a smile on my face, I quickly ran up to my dorm room and changed my bloody clothes, setting a reminder in my head to burn them. I put the gun in my zip-lock bag and shoved it under my bed, thinking maybe I'll need it again. I walk out of the dorm and see my friends waiting in the hall. It's almost time for lunch, so we walk down the main stairs, and that's when I see a crowd in the middle of the staircase surrounding Theo. I hear screams coming from all over the place. Haha!

Let me go back to the beginning when I first met Theo YEARS ago. We grew up in the small town of Eureka Springs and our moms were best friends. We were always together and we became inseparable! What one of us did, the other would always follow. Our moms thought we would end up dating and in high school, it finally happened. All of our classmates thought we were the power couple, and I believed them. Everything was perfect for a while, but six months later our relationship started falling apart. In the summer of our senior year, we stopped talking all together. I missed him more than ever, but eventually I knew he had moved on.

One day I came up with a brilliant idea. I had been waiting for the perfect time to text him and today is his birthday. This was the opportunity to get our conversations going again. I was so excited when he answered me right away. I had to make sure his feelings for me were mutual, and no, I'm not as crazy as I seem. I would get him back one way or another and there will be no other choice.

One Month Later...

The month school was starting, I received the news that I had been accepted into Eureka Springs Private School. It was the best private school in our town. My mom had tried enrolling me during the start of summer, but I was put on the waiting list. Hearing this news now is like finding presents under the Christmas tree. I couldn't believe it. I was so bummed out during the summer months, that I started taking matters into my own hands. I worked so hard during those couple of months learning everything I needed for this school year, and it definitely paid off.

Fast forward to the first day of my new school. I was beyond excited. As I walked into my math class, I saw him sitting at the desk near the window. Huh, what a lovely surprise!

Now that I think about it, our moms signed us up at the same time. I always knew Theo was smart, so I was shocked when he got on the waiting list as well. I went and sat next to him, and he looked at me and smiled.

"Hey Camila," he said.

I said, "Hello" while trying to hide all my excitement. I turned my head and started listening to the teacher talk, since Math had always been my worst subject. At the end of the class, our teacher said to get into pairs (which I was happy about) and start working on our new project. I looked at him, he looked at me, and we nodded in agreement. We were together a lot now; sometimes I would come to his dorm, and sometimes he would come to mine to work on the project. Everything came naturally to us, as if we were in second grade doing math homework together again.

Spending time with Theo made me realize how much I actually missed him, and I know he felt it too. After the math project ended, we started hanging out outside of school, like getting coffee at our favorite coffee shop or going on walks around the lake. You would have thought that we were dating, and of course you were right. We started dating again five months after our math teacher put us together, but once again things did not work out. We argued all the time, but the next day we were fine. I never complained, and I made sure he did not either. Eventually, he couldn't take it anymore. He dumped me right in front of all his friends. Can you believe it? Well, I couldn't either. I would get my revenge! So that's what brings me here, pointing the gun at him and pulling the trigger.

When he fell on the stairs, I didn't feel bad; he honestly had it coming. I mean, did he really think he would get away with humiliating me in front of everyone? Absolutely not! But now screams snap me back into reality.

"How did this happen?"

"Who would ever do this?"

"The person that did this is out of their mind."

"We need to find the killer! Now!"

The teachers eventually heard the news and pushed through the crowd of students. They all saw Theo on the stairs and gasped. They rushed everyone out to the lunch room and canceled all the afternoon classes. While at lunch, no one talked. No one said a word. It was so quiet, you could hear a pin drop. When lunch was over, everyone walked out pale faced and I noticed no one had actually eaten anything. As I was stepping out, I decided that I needed a second to breathe, but I saw the police crowding over Theo's body. He was blue and bloody with a white outline of where he lay. I casually walked past and let out a breath once I was outside. I needed to hide all evidence quickly. There was no time to spare. But first, I needed my coffee. Once I got back to school, I couldn't do it right away since the police were asking questions to all the kids that were standing in the halls nearby.

"Who do you think had a motive to do this?"

"Do you know anyone who would ever think of this?"

But none of the kids remembered what happened between us, and I was glad. Days past, then weeks past, and finally months past. The police had no major suspect, so they closed the case, and everyone moved on as if it never happened. But I could tell Theo was always in someone's mind.

Beginning of Winter

I woke up bright and early this morning, and went downstairs for breakfast, but immediately stopped in my tracks. The police were here. Again. Why are they here? What happened now? Theo.. No, there's no way. The case was closed a long time ago. No evidence was ever found.

One policeman saw me and smiled. I went up to him and asked what was going on.

"Well, ma'am, you know the poor fella named Theo Parks who was murdered months ago? The case is back on. We got a call from a random number saying that someone in the school hasn't been truthful to us. They also said it was a girl. What silly evidence! Doesn't help much but we're trying our best," he said.

"Oh well, that's great. I mean, now you will be able to find out who killed him." I say trying to self assure myself.

I continued walking to the breakfast hall, but now I wasn't hungry at all. I felt as if I was going to throw up, even with no food in my stomach. That was when I saw Chloe staring me down. Let me explain. Chloe and I went to the same high school while I was dating Theo. I knew she wanted him, but I never said anything. I didn't want to be the jealous type of girlfriend. Anyway, she got accepted into Eureka Springs Private, and left the old school. I was so glad, considering that I hated her with all my heart. Now, as she stares at me, I know it was her. I know she called the police, and I knew she knew what I had done. So obviously, I had to do something about it.

When I was doing my homework late that night, I suddenly remembered that I never burned the bloody clothes like I intended. So when I knew everyone would be asleep, I quickly snuck into Chloes room, put the clothes right under her bed with a little part sticking out, and I took the gun and quietly tried to hide it under her mattress. I must confess it was harder than it looked, but thankfully she didn't wake up. I then ran out of her room, called the police, and left an anonymous note.

The next morning, I heard screaming coming from her dorm.

"WHAT IS THIS? NO PLEASE! IT'S NOT MINE." I heard from the other room.

I ran into her room; her hands were behind her back, and the officers were putting handcuffs on. I saw the clothes and gun in the policeman's hands.

"Oh my god, what happened? Chloe, what did you do?" I say with a gasp.

"You witch, I know what you did! Don't you dare think you are getting away with this," she whispers in my ear.

"Oh, but I already have," I said quietly.

She gives me a dirty look as the officers take her away. At that point, everyone is now gathered around her dorm, staring. I hear whispers coming from all directions, but then my eyes catch on the policeman I talked to early and I go and talk to him.

"Hey, you found your suspect, I guess." I said.

"Yes, it appears so," he says, looking as shocked as ever before. Maybe it's his first time arresting someone?

### New Year's Party

It was finally New Year and I had bought a pretty green dress with stars that sparkled in the light. I couldn't wait to wear it! It was finally time for the party that the school held every year. I put my dress on, did my hair, and then my makeup. Now, looking in the mirror, I look at myself with awe. I look stunning! And I'm not saying this in a pick me way, but you get the point. As I put my final touches on, I hear a knock on the door, and I see my friends waiting for me. Once they see me, they all gasp.

"Wow, Camila, you look stunning," they said.

"Thank you guys! But yall look amazing as well, " I replied blushing.

We start walking down the main stairs, and I see all my friends going to their dates. It makes me realize how much I miss Theo. But, I mean, he's dead, so there's nothing I can do.

We walked into the room, and the music started blasting in my ears. It was dark but also very colorful from all the DJ lights. Once we all gave our tickets to the people by the doors, me and my friends went to the dance floor and we started to sing and dance along to the songs until we were all tired. Panting we eventually found a free table to sit at, and I glanced at my phone with a pounding heart. 11:30, it read. 30 minutes left until 2035!

Just then, I heard a boom. Looking to the front expecting to see some guys being annoying, I see the doors slammed and the whole police force standing, staring straight at me.

What's going on?

I was paralyzed with fear while they all walked up to me.

"Camila Rod, you are under arrest for the murder of Theo Parks," he says, holding my hands behind my back and sliding the handcuffs roughly on. The cold metal gave me chills all the way down my back. Everyone stopped and stared at me with intensity as they took me outside. I noticed that my friends had chased after me and started defending me in front of the police.

"Camila would never do such a thing," one of them said.

"Are you crazy? Let her go she would never hurt anyone," said another.

But the cop didn't care and threw me into the back of the car. It was a 30-minute ride to the nearby police station. As we were driving, I stared out the window fearful to know what would happen to me. Once we arrived, it felt as if it's been hours! They quickly took me inside and hurled me into a cell. I was confused and scared.

Why am I arrested? I thought they took Chloe? What is going on???

The next morning, they took me to the interrogation room. A scary looking man sat down in front of me with a little note pad. Before he said anything I started to speak.

"What did I do? I swear I never did anything to him," I said, talking faster than ever, and trying to sound at least a little convincing.

He did not seem to listen and just wrote down something that I couldn't see. He then started talking.

"You remember Chloe Banks? She had told us her story, and we soon realized that she had no reason to kill Mr. Parks and then she started ranting about you and how you framed her. She then named all the motives you would have had. I thought it was weird at first, that she was just naming a random person but I decided to look into it anyway. We then pulled up all the cameras at the school and found something missing. You're a smart one, aren't you," said the officer. "You erased all the footage of you shooting Mr. Parks. But you did forget one thing or maybe you just didn't know. Ms. Chloe has a camera in her room that only she has access to for extra protection. She told us about it and gave us permission to look through it and guess what we found," he says it matter of factly.

"I-," I can't finish my sentence before he interrupts again.

"So as we looked in the camera, everything seemed to be all in place until we got to the night that you snuck in and hid all of the evidence in her room. At first, I didn't believe it. I mean, you seem like a very smart and intelligent girl, and I would never think you would be a part of something like this," he says laughing now.

"I would never hurt anyone! Exceptionally kill someone, are you out of your mind? Why would I ever do something like that??" I say shocked.

"Oh don't play dumb Ms. Rod, I already know what you did. We have enough evidence to throw you in jail," he says back.

"Fine, you're right. I killed Theo Parks. But it's not my fault," I said, not having the energy to argue anymore.

"Great! Thank you for making this all very easy, Ms. Rod. Officer take her back into her cell!" he shouts.

They toss me back into the cell, but don't worry, this isn't where my story ends. I have more to go. I sat in jail for a couple months, but then I thought why am I sitting here if I

could be out? In the month of April, I found a way to escape and ran away. I then eventually left the country and went to live with my grandma in Europe. (Yes, I also changed my name; don't worry.) Now I'm Scarlett Green, and I can't wait to go on another adventure! Who knows what I will do next?

Student Name: Jili Dai  
Grade: 12  
School: Jordan High School  
Title: The Price of Freedom; is Innocence Lost  
Category: Portfolio Category(Writing)  
Key: Silver Key  
Educator: Jili Dai

### Chalice of Cocytus

quiet blanketed the marbled halls  
for the first time in recorded memory.  
four knights rode out in gleaming armor  
for a final grand tour and victory.

harsh silence rang for half an hour,  
and the wind had lost its howl.  
only then did the sovereign open his eyes,  
fated to cast a dangerous die.

fragrant incense was laid bare  
atop the people's gilded altar.  
their vengeance received as prayer,  
billowing from the litanies and psalters.

lightning cast down in a fragrant breeze  
violence flashes in the thunder,  
burying the anguish of widows in the sundering  
until their tears had salted the seas.

for conquest had gored the hearts of men,

for war had devoured their wits.

for famine had stolen their spirit,

of the fourth who were slit.

and for death had built a crimson winery,

from which the blood of Saints would fail to sate

the indomitable hunger of babylon.

Student Name: Rebecca Neumeister

Grade: 12

School: Jordan High School

Title: The Army Green-Skin

Category: Short Story

Key: Silver Key

Educator: William Clouse

The trailer home sat vacant, waiting for Jax to come back from school. As usual, his father was at the bar down the street by himself. His father had always been a drunk, and it was reflected in how Jax looked, acted, and how his home looked as well. His mom died during Jax's birth, and only left Jax with a couple items to his name: a locket, a small sum of money, and a file on a USB that was unable to be opened until his eighteenth birthday. Jax dropped his school bag down next to the kitchen table, and stared at the Army recruitment letter he found in the mailbox.

As soon as graduation passed, Jax joined the Army. Bootcamp was hell, but he didn't care since it took him out of the trailer and away from his drunken father.

Besides, all the abuse he had suffered, both physical and mental, gave him a leg up for bootcamp. The Drill Sergeant's barks and screams bounced off of Jax, for they were nothing new to him. All of their typical tactics; threats of extra physical training and yelling, didn't scare him. So, they had to come up with new insults, and the locket he wore did not go unnoticed. The CO, Conner Baker, realized what Jax was attempting to get away from.

Baker had a similar experience to Jax, but he was unable to show any soft spot for the boy. In turn, he pushed Jax harder and faster than everyone else. By the time graduation came around, Jax had become the best in his class, let alone one of the best that Ft. Hood had ever seen.

His shooting accuracy: Deadly.

His training times: Setting records.

His conduct: Impeccable.

It was almost as if he was a machine, made for this.

Despite all of this, he wasn't awarded the best cadet.

This just dragged on him when he got to the Graduation Party. No matter how hard he tried to disappear, everyone just teased him for not getting the award. The same old bullies from the Platoon and the Drill Sergeants laughed in his face, sparing no insult.

"You're a loser, you'll never make it."

"You'll always get second place."

"You will never amount to anything."

"Couldn't you just push to be that little bit better?"

Those words swam in Jax's head, on repeat, unrelenting. The only thing the words did was open the floodgate of the memories he had repressed from his childhood. Just as the thoughts pushed him into a corner, he spotted the most beautiful girl he had ever seen.

She was ethereal.

She was done up like a princess, ready for her big night.

Her brunette hair, it fell in loose ringlets from her updo, and her kind, jade eyes sparkled in the dim party lights. Her dress may have been a bit scandalous for an Army graduation

party: a plunging neckline to the bottom of her sternum, with a slit up to her hip, and tight fabric hugging every curve of her body.

However, she looked very familiar, almost as if her face resembled someone Jax had known during basic training. Jax thought about it for a moment.

Drill Sergeants?

No.

Platoon?

Nope.

A Commanding Officer?

Yes.

Of course, she had to be the only untouchable, unattainable thing Jax could ever want. He turned to leave before his mind would wonder about her, but not before he finally caught her eye. To her, his eyes were interesting, the colors mixing and melding into something she couldn't describe. Taking in his tanned skin, soft muscles, and pristine appearance, he resembled a fairytale prince. Her heart tugged after him, but she knew if her father found out, he'd make Jax's life a living hell.

After this encounter, they went their separate ways, except for when they frequently caught each other's eye around the base. Whenever Jax saw her, she would always be helping out in the medical building or entertaining the kids that lived on base. He felt jealous of the kids since he never received such care when he was a child, but he buried that feeling. His heart continued to soften for her, but since he was known by many to have a rather unemotional disposition, he couldn't show an inkling of feeling.

But each time Samatha saw Jax, she couldn't help the smile that crept up her face and her heart fluttering like a butterfly in the summer breeze. She noticed the locket around his neck, which glinted in the light and the faint outline of a USB rested in his shirt pocket, which drew more and more questions to her. She knew that she shouldn't ask him silly

little questions like, “Do you have a girlfriend?” or anything of the sort. Regardless, she wanted that special person to be her. She always yearned for a connection with somebody, but no one had ever made her feel connected. Despite Jax and Samantha never speaking a word to each other, she felt a pull to him, similar to how magnets pulled themselves together.

Nevertheless, they watched each other from afar, wishing they could be together. She watched him leave to go to the barracks again, but this time she decided to follow him. She saw him enter the barracks furthest from the Medical Center, which just told her that he happened to be in one of the platoons her father led. She filed this information away for later, but Jax was left in the dark, thinking he would only see her from afar the rest of his life.

That next morning, Jax received orders to report to Fort Belvoir, Virginia, where he would be stationed for the unforeseeable future.

He never knew Samantha's name, but he knew her face. He thought of her every day for two weeks before he was called into his new CO's office. Except, there was no Commanding Officer there. Sitting on the corner of the desk, scrolling through her phone, was just the girl that entranced him at the party. She had run her own investigations after he left, asking her father about the mystery man she fell in love with. Her father, Colonel Connor Baker, told Samantha about how hardworking, special, and courageous Jax had been during training.

At the sound of the door opening, she looked up and made a move to embrace Jax, but he just stood there in blatant shock. The shock, however, was short-lived, for he knew at this point she would be far enough away from her father that he could finally unearth his true emotions towards her.

In true Army fashion, they knew each other for a little time before getting married. However, it wasn't an issue. Jax was drawn to the fact that she took initiative to find him and pursue him, even after he had moved across the country. He was also drawn to her caring and nurturing nature, something he didn't really get to have growing up. As a couple they had the same humor and the same likes and dislikes. It was no surprise that they instantly clicked.

They ended up also looking into the USB since now Jax was 19. He wanted desperately to open the file a year ago, however, during basic training made this impossible. No computers were available to access the file, and even on the off-chance he could lay hands on one, he probably wouldn't have sufficient time to sit down and look to see what the file had in store.

Once Samantha and Jax settled into a home, Jax was finally able to open the file on the USB he kept close to his heart. As he plugged it into the computer, his heart pounded, and he became nervous about what could be on it. Samantha came up behind him, and gave his shoulder a reassuring squeeze. It was a heartwarming and emotional home video of his mother, telling Jax how much she missed him and how she was sorry for missing all of his major life events. The emotions he had been harboring for 19 years had now been opened and there was no way of stopping the waterworks from his eyes. He never knew his mother, but now everything made a bit more sense.

Years later Jax returned home, a pregnant Samantha by his side. He had hopes to let his father know that he would soon be a grandfather, but he opened the door to find his drunken father splayed across the trailer home's couch. His father barely recognized him, let alone the woman who accompanied him. His son, once scrawny and weak, had transformed into this muscled man towering above him. At this point in his life, Jax realized he no longer needed approval from a man who never truly cared about him.

Jax had become accomplished in the army at this point and had risen to ranks that almost no one had risen to in that amount of time. He found himself a doting wife, and had a child on the way.

It was like his life went from bad to perfect.

Just like a fairytale.

Student Name: Owen Isdal

Grade: 8

School: Adams Junior High School

Title: The Beauty; and slow disappearance of our modern world

Category: Critical Essay

Key: Silver Key

Educator: Martinez Kelly D

When you look at the sunset, it's like being transported into a different plane than the ground you stand on. A distraction from the bad that emanates around everyone. Sitting in a fluffy layer of nature, waiting for the sun to fall down along the flowing, ever changing sky. It is the things we're lucky to be alive for, and to experience that are truly incredible. I hope that someday I'll be able to look up and continue gazing into that beautiful sky for the rest of time, but looking up again? I'm not so sure. If we're already seeing signs of the beautiful white stars falling out of twilight, then how are we so sure our world will be safe for so much longer? That the canvas of creation might not stand tall anymore? That all the nice perks about our planet could just vanish, one by one? It sparks a want for change.

Now, let's zoom in to the planet we call home. It has a lot of exciting little perks that others lack, such as breathable oxygen, drinkable water, but that's not what I'm looking for. Its real uniqueness comes from the ever-changing civilization occurring every day in our home, and the evolution of our rocky planet over such a short span of time. Like, compared to the billions of years our planet has been in action, 5000 years doesn't really seem like a lot. It's crazy really, and looking at it from a historic perspective, 5000 years ago the first civilization of the Greeks began to evolve into thriving and working governments. They had lives, with different interests and different technologies, that evolved over time into the grand ideas that our people have grown to think up. But is this speedy evolution a good thing? If you look into it a little closer, you realize that today we're stuck with the problems that the people before us left us with, and it's the things that they were mesmerized by, and the things that gave them comfort in their homes that eventually began to bite back at us. The grand line in the form of our mistakes, coming to give us the leftovers that we put aside. These problems could easily be passed on for another half-century, but that's not going to work. They have been moved around constantly for centuries, and now it's our turn to do something about it. Violence. Climate Change. The 2 most debated issues of the 21st century, and the most damaging to our planet. War, and a Worsening Climate. Destruction, and Deterioration. It's the things that are the worst that are the hardest to solve, and it's awfully clear that our people haven't been trying hard enough to do something about it. I mean yes, we have thousands of scientists working on studies and ideas of what we could possibly do, but there have

been hundreds if not thousands of studies that overall show we're not on a good trajectory. There are poor countries, and rich countries that are tasked to do the same job. The rich are tasked with a percentage of their annual income towards the task, but if the poor are given the same task? I don't think they'll be able to hold up.

The average adult in the United States makes around 30-60 thousand USD per year and seeing how the U.S is the second-most harmful when looking at harmful greenhouse gas production (as of 2023), it's not great. I mean, 60 thousand dollars could do a lot, and that's important seeing as the emissions aren't getting better. It's showing how there isn't enough being done, and how there needs to be more effort made by each individual country, (especially the U.S) to help control their individual impacts. But we've just been talking about the United States emissions, and if we look at it as a whole, the U.S only produces 14% of the total. Yeah, 14%. The fact that one of the biggest and most populated countries in the world isn't even able to solve a fourth of the problem, makes it even worse for the poorer countries whose people aren't able to help with anything! Take Rwanda for example. It's dead center in the middle of Sub-Saharan Africa, and the average income as of 2023 is only around \$600 per year. Just think about that. \$600. That's close to 1% of the average American's salary. Think about how detrimental that is. The 14 million Rwandans living at \$600 per year. \$600 to feed their children and themselves, non-stop. With all of that stress worrying about how they are impacting our planet is likely on the bottom of their list.

In our view, solving the world's climate problems will require tapping into brain power beyond science. That's why the two of us are teaming up to rethink climate solutions." (Allison, Miller, paragraph 4) While looking into it, the article showed me that a lot of people have similar ideas about the problem, but they're also just a little bit different. Seawalls and Chemical solutions are more scientific and mechanical and take the approach of saving our cities from the inevitable waves of doom, but they also mentioned taking more people on to help with the project. I think that would be a good plan, as the more minds you have working on the issue, the more likely it is you'll make a discovery. Overall, the thing we need to focus on the most to solve this issue is to just continue working towards clean electricity and transportation, as well as attempting to conceal the number of animals being mass-grazed and killed. It's really just a thing of responsibility, and I think we as people should be required to at-least make a small act or change to help our world. And as a last resort? We can still build seawalls to protect our coastal cities from inevitable drowning.

Now, it's time to talk about a more maneuverable and predictable problem. Wars have been raging throughout the world and the 7 seas for as long as civilization has been around. 1 rock thrown, bullet fired, sword slashed, it's all one in the same. But how can we stop the modern world from going through with any harsh and desperate actions? Well, speaking in terms of the United States and Russia, they both have depleted their nuclear stockpile by more than 50%, which is great, but there are still thousands of

warheads ready to be used. The growing problem with so many bombs is the threat of another type of war. Of course, there's Russia's war in Ukraine, but there's also the psychological and communicational battle between not sending flaming balls of death at each other's cities. And what can we do about this? Well, it's not really in our people's control, but we can attempt to send a message. I mean after all; someone has to listen eventually. Well, we could either get rid of the nuclear stockpile altogether (which isn't in our people's control) or we could petition a vote for a no-first use policy. I think this is explained thoroughly in an article by A Union of Concerned Scientists, "Current policy allows the United States to begin a nuclear war by being the first to use nuclear weapons in a conflict" ([ucausa.com](http://ucausa.com), Nuclear Weapons Solutions, Paragraph 4) as well as "A no-first-use policy would take this option off the table. Doing so would reduce the risk of miscalculation during a crisis, and limit the possibility of a smaller, non-nuclear conflict escalating into a nuclear one." ([uca.usa.com](http://uca.usa.com), Nuclear Weapons Solutions, Paragraph 5) I think this is important because it points out the fact that in this current day and age, any country with access to Nuclear Warheads could send a single one to a stronger power and cause a domino effect. They point out the important solution of coming to an agreement to not use Nuclear Warheads before anyone else, and I think if enough people can band together, they can make an impact all across the globe.

In the end of all of this, I look into the sunset once more as I hope that my words can make a difference. Within the next 50 years, we'll see if the scientists of today's age, and the coming generations, will be able to discover something phenomenal. I hope that we as a civilization will be able to agree upon some kind of peace, and that somehow, somehow the icy peaks will be able to stay frozen for a long time. Finally, I can look up at the sky once more and continue to hope just a little stronger, knowing that my thoughts and suggestions are clear in the sky. It's a pity that we have nothing real we can do to solve this, but in the end, we'll get through it.

Student Name: Aerial Chen

Grade: 10

School: Seven Lakes High School

Title: The Eyes of Miss

Category: Short Story

Key: Silver Key

Educator:

Miss is the name of my master.

The first time I visited her home, she looked at me as if unsure, questions and curiosities that I could not quite name dancing in her eyes. I wondered if it was because my clothes weren't tidy enough or if my appearance wasn't one of an apprentice, but after I put on my best attempt at the face of someone who had an endless thirst for knowledge, she put her hands on her hips and permitted me to call her Miss.

Miss led me to the room she wished to teach me lessons in. I noticed creatures of legend drifting and flowing along the walls, their forms like dying flames; paintings of myth I could not name nor recognize, yet distinctly felt drawn to; words and symbols that glowed with unspoken and unrealized meaning, but lacked motivation. They all had her eyes.

That first day, she spoke of many things, most of which I did not understand. She must have realized that I had begun drifting off, for her voice suddenly shifted into a more colorful and fascinating tone. This successfully captured my attention and she smiled when she saw something in my face that I did not.

She asked me what it was that I wished to learn.

"Wisdom," I told her.

At this, her eyes sparkled with what was most likely a laugh. "Wisdom," she told me, "is not learned." But then, perhaps after a moment more of thought, she nodded and placed

her finger against her chin. "However, if that is what you wish, then that is what you shall learn."

She then dismissed me with a smile and a wave of her hand. I found myself wandering in a realm of clouds, surrounded by the serene paleness of their soft forms. I remained there until I next felt Miss beckon for me to return to her side.

—

Miss doesn't talk much.

After receiving her lessons and watching her every movement and manner for a long while, I began to notice that the behavior she exhibited on the first day wasn't an appropriate demonstration of her character.

Maybe it was my fault for losing focus during her very first lesson, which must have given her an awful impression of me, perhaps leading her to believe that I wasn't interested in the art that sprung from her voice. But every time I brought up that day with the intention of clearing up a misunderstanding, she'd hold a finger to her lips, eyes sparkling, and beckon toward the walls.

"What do you see?" she would ask, her face always hidden from my view

"What do I see?" was my confused response the first time she asked me this question, merely an echo of her words, without much thought behind them. I craned my head in an attempt to see her eyes, but would only see the soft curls of her hair. And then I turned to face the walls; the very walls that piqued my interest the first day I stepped within those halls, full of mysteries, none of which I had yet proved to pin down, to grasp and unravel.

"What do you see?" she'd ask again, and she would repeat this question every couple minutes until I responded with a voice of my own that didn't carry her colors and fascinations.

“Legends,” I finally said.

Miss gave me a look that was laced with something I could not quite yet decipher—was it disappointment? Pride? Wonder? Indifference? I did not know the answer, nor the answer she was looking for. But upon seeing the downcast expression that must have formed on my face, she’d reach over and pat me on the head, her eyes still unreadable but perhaps containing a bit more warmth. I drank in that warmth, greedily savoring it, still so far from the Wisdom I had told her I yearned to find.

—

Miss smiles a lot.

I do not know for how long I was apprenticed under her wing, but I eventually began to notice the little lines that formed by her mouth when she laughed, the crows’ feet that creased by her eyes when her lips curled up at the corners. Her smiles always reached her eyes, always filled her expression with something akin to mirth, and I’d find my own face brightening to match hers.

There was always something strangely fascinating about her. The way emotion twisted her face, the way her gaze was enough to bring comfort or sorrow. Her eyes, always searching, always unraveling my expression with the same intensity I studied hers.

Once, Miss had touched my chin, and with a faint smile playing upon her features, said, “You are beginning to resemble your master.”

I had stared at her blankly as my mind furiously worked to decipher her speech.

“The mind or eyes?” I eventually questioned.

“Well, I can’t quite say.”

Her eyes shone with something I failed to understand. I expressed my confusion and she simply smiled, a hint of amusement in her demeanor, her face creasing ever so slightly as her expression changed.

“Who do you think your master is?” she asked me, the colors of her voice soft and pale.

“Miss, of course.”

Her smile became peculiar. Her lips tugged waywards, her gaze flickered briefly.

“Is that so?”

Her eyes glinted with something mysterious and I did not speak to her for the remainder of that day. Tasked to study books, I pondered as I flipped through those yellowed pages, and found that I could not decipher the twisted and faded script; nor could I ever recall Miss reaching for the dusty spines I often held in my hands.

—

Miss speaks with her eyes.

One day, she glanced at me with a particularly guarded expression.

As I was unfamiliar with that expression, I immediately stilled, scouring my memory for anything I might have done wrong. But a faint glimmer in her eyes told me it wasn't something of my fault, and I allowed myself to relax.

“This place,” she said, “is yours.”

I, at that time, hadn't a clue as to what she meant by that statement. I voiced my questions, and said that I was clearly standing in my master's abode, not my own. Yet, she had no response, for she was oddly quiet that day, even for someone who doesn't talk much, and she merely resumed trimming the warped plants.

It was that day I noticed the windows, previously obscured by heavy curtains, were now fully uncovered and open to the world. I approached a window, set my hands on the windowsill, and peered at the endless clouds I saw outside, at the serenity and tranquility that drifted among those soft forms.

A reflection of the room around me peered back. I stared at myself, looked into my eyes, and saw eyes of uncertainty; questions and curiosities that I could not quite name dancing in a blank expression. A blank expression that must have been my own. I saw lines on my face, traces of crow's feet by my eyes, yet when I slid my fingers along my face, all I felt was smooth skin.

Miss was strangely absent from the reflection. I turned around to see if she had left the room and saw her standing still, no longer bent over her plants with trimmers in hand. She stared at the wall in front of her, eerily quiet, not uttering so much as a single sound or word.

I looked back at the window, and saw that she was still not there in the reflection.

"Miss," I called, "why is this so?"

She finally returned my gaze, the ghost of a smile on her face. She then held a finger to her lips, voice barely above a whisper, and asked me,

"What do you see?"

That time, I truly had no answer to give her, even though it had been staring at me directly in the eyes just before.

Wisdom, I thought, had been barely beyond my grasp.

—

It suddenly became apparent to me.

The answer to Miss's question, perhaps, or merely another loose thought.

Miss must have noticed, for she is especially keen when it comes to my subtle changes in behavior, and she gave me a look that permitted me to divulge the crashing waves of thought in my mind. I didn't reply, though, unsure as I was about my answer.

Miss didn't seem to mind, even though she had said many times before that to hesitate is to lose. However, as the shadows lengthened and I continued to flip through the pages of the various books I had been tasked with, a subtle flare in her eyes told me her patience was wearing thin.

Before I could open my mouth and speak to pacify her, she gently picked up the book from my hands and closed it. A look on her face told me to stand up, so I did, and then she turned to face the walls, the very question that she had asked me so many times forming upon her lips.

"What do you see?"

Out of habit, I examined the walls one more time. They were still otherworldly, flowing and drifting with patterns and creatures, each emanating its own glow or aura, as if the walls themselves were thriving with life. Despite all of Miss's teachings, they still perplexed me, yet I had a distinct feeling that Miss herself didn't quite understand them, either.

I opened my mouth to voice the small observation that had been quietly gnawing away at my mind ever since I stepped foot within Miss's home.

“Your eyes.”

I looked directly into Miss’s eyes, and saw that for the first time in the many days we had spent together, she did not immediately return my gaze, intentionally avoiding eye contact.

“They have your eyes,” I said.

Miss finally met my eyes, and she smiled. It was the largest I had ever seen her smile, but it was entirely devoid of pride, and it did not reach those eyes that gazed upon me. She was happy, but not for me, and upon realizing this, an indescribably icy sensation gripped my chest.

I had lifted my hand to reach out to her, for I had suddenly felt that she was very far away, when she spoke to me again with an odd sense of formality.

“You have reached it. Wisdom,” were the detached words that left her mouth. “I have succeeded as your master, and you my apprentice. I have nothing more to teach you.”

I did not know what she meant. Rather, I did not want to know what she meant. She began walking away, her back facing me, her eyes hidden from my sight. Without much thought, I followed her, far too many questions circling in my head to believe I had obtained Wisdom.

Yet, with each step she took, she seemed to get farther, and it wasn’t long before I found myself alone in her home. I thought this was very strange, and I continued to look for her. I faced the walls, beckoning them to lend me a piece of their endless knowledge, only to be left with what I knew was a silent affirmation truth.

Suddenly, I heard the door open, and it was at that moment I realized I was in the corridor that led to the front door. I instinctively turned towards the source of the sound and saw a child wander in.

The child was wearing unkempt clothes and a particularly blank expression. Not quite sure how to respond, I simply stared at her, and she stared at me back. She shifted the expression on her face and tried to mimic an expression of curiosity, as if she could ever hide the lifelessness that crept beneath her gaze.

It occurred to me that she must have wanted to know my name. I put my hands on my hips, opening my mouth to tell her what name to call me by, and felt my blood run cold.

What is my name?

The child stared up at me, her monotonous gaze unblinking, a rather expectant expression on her face. I found my lips moving to speak as my voice acted before my mind.

Do I have a name?

The following words that left my mouth felt both incredibly familiar yet strangely foreign, for I had realized that the only name that existed within my memory, even amongst all the books I had seen, even with all of the teachings I had received, was none other than the name of my master.

“You may call me Miss.”

Student Name: Katherine Wu  
Grade: 9  
School: Seven Lakes High School  
Title: The Fallacy of Free Time  
Category: Personal Essay & Memoir  
Key: Silver Key  
Educator:

'Affirmative Action divided Asian Americans and other people of color' I furrow my brow as I scroll through the NPR article with one hand. In the other, I hold my toothbrush trying to move my hand in circular motions. Toothpaste drops from my brush into the sink. I sigh, rummage through the medicine cabinet, find the toothpaste tube, and reapply it to my brush. Then I return to the article.

Pulling a sweater over my head, I blindly stumble into the kitchen just as the sun is rising. Flashcards are laid out for me next to my breakfast of fruit and cereal.

"You have an extra dance lesson tonight for your solo, my mom says as she nudges a big glass of water towards me. "Remember you're competing this weekend."

I nod. "What time will I be done?" I ask.

"10pm. You're doing this class after the group rehearsal."

I take a moment to mentally recalibrate my homework schedule. Then I nod again.

On the drive to school, my mom quizzes me on the pros and cons of having a US military presence in the Arctic. I don't know which side I'll be asked during my debate practice after school, in the timeslot before dance.

At school, I race through hallways, flip through textbooks, and rejoice at the few moments my friends and I spend on our phones scrolling through TikTok during lunch – a few unplanned minutes. As I walk to class, I remember the article I read this morning on affirmative action being taken away. What does this mean for my college applications, as a minority applicant?

At home, I lay out my textbooks on my desk in the order of the homework I will complete, accounting for the hour I've lost due to my dance solo practice. I dive into bed, pull out my phone and open the timer. There was traffic on the drive home, so I have to adjust my timer from twenty-six minutes to twenty-three. I set it and enjoy, as I sink into brief sleep.

My mother's voice echoes in the background, "You need to stop going on your phone, use that precious time to read your textbook!" I look around. Did my timer not go off? Was I not just sleeping? "Look at Stephanie, she got a 100 on her quiz and you got a 90..." I turn

to see my mother towering over me. “How come Stephanie was able to get a 100 and you were not?” Tears begin welling in my eyes. “Why are you crying, ah ya, stop crying, there is nothing to cry about.” My mom’s voice fades away as my eyes close, tears spilling over.

Trrrrring - I’m ripped from my sleep. I rub my eyes, tears staining my fingers. I tumble downstairs, where my mom has a light dinner of rice, beef, and a few vegetables prepared ahead of our commute to the dance studio. I try to spoon bites into my mouth between her endless questions: “What is another way to say threatened homeostasis?” “Can you define the word ‘exasperation’?” I answer questions diligently and recount what I learned in school today.

After dance practice, I stretch in my room while practicing pronunciation for my Chinese oral exam this weekend. I hope to impress my tutor, and I also hope to satisfy my mom and negotiate not taking Chinese lessons on weekends.

Changing into my pajamas, I burrow into my blanket. In bed, I reopen the article I didn’t get to finish in the morning. Affirmative action was supposed to ensure fair consideration in admissions, but admissions data suggested that Asian Americans were discriminated against in admissions decisions that considered race. Confused and concerned, I wondered what am I even working towards if not getting into a good college?

I overhear my mom on the phone talking to another mom in our community. The conversation seems to be about SAT and ACT preparation. College preparations can never start too early...or can they?

It seems that pregnant moms have already charted out what college their embryo will attend, and how a very selective pre-school will plant their child on the road to success. In their eyes, it is never too early to begin social engineering.

Being compared against my Chinese American friends on all possible quantitative and qualitative metrics – grades, trophies, passions, politeness – is exhausting. It also solidifies the standards young Chinese Americans are held against. Standards of endless studying and having no meaningful social life remove individualism and create robotic model children – almost indistinguishable from one another.

As college applications become increasingly more competitive, young Chinese-Americans are groomed to perfection, producing model test scores, a balanced spread of extracurriculars, and most definitely no free time. No time to be young and curious and experimental. No time to learn what distinguishes them as people.

Although I have a matrix of extracurriculars most days, there are a few special hours each week where I unexpectedly encounter the luxury of free time. Whether it be finishing my homework early, or having a club meeting canceled that would normally end at 9:00 pm, those are the hours I treasure most, for those are the hours where I feel I am my own person.

When I have a moment to myself, I often find myself thinking about how to look at a concept from a new perspective. I recall a time when my parents took me out to dinner as a break from studying. Between bites of rice and conversations about upcoming holiday plans, I found my thoughts going back to the complicated percentage calculations I was doing in math class. Once the bill came, my parents paused as they estimated the tip. I took the bill from them and calculated 21% for the tip. Quietly impressed, they signed and we headed home.

After a moment of free time, I had the mental space to grow new applications for concepts I had learned in school. Free time made me feel like I could think creatively and apply knowledge in a meaningful way.

This is for my parents. If I do this, I'll earn my parents' praise. I blindly stumble into the kitchen expecting flash cards with dinner. Nothing. My mom sits next to me smiling. "You have had enough work to do, I think it is better if we tone down your schedule." Disbelief. "You should hang out with your friends sometime, invite them over." Utter shock.

This conversation with my mom made me feel like more than a schedule. It not only made me feel recognized as a person, but also gave me the confidence to choose how I spend my time. Putting together my own schedule, I practice prioritizing my activities and figuring out what is important to me – what I value. Perhaps my new matrix of activities – interwoven with free time – will shape me into a unique college applicant. Free time is not wasted time, it is an opportunity to reflect on who you are in the world and how you want to navigate your own path through it.

Student Name: Alexa Smyk

Grade: 12

School: Cinco Ranch High School

Title: The Interview

Category: Dramatic Script

Key: Silver Key

Educator:

A: Understandable, it's a beautiful day. What exactly is going through your mind?

B: Memories.

A: Memories? Of that night?

B: Of him.

A: You have made contradicting statements about your father, Why was that night your breaking point?

B: Alcohol messes with the brain, you can lose what little sanity you have.

(Tape clicks.)

A: Listen, I'm on your side. All I want is the truth, and I want to make sure everyone gets a chance to hear the truth, your truth. Everyone knows what you did, we just don't understand why. You deny any allegations of abuse, yet you flinch if someone even slightly raises their voice. In fact, I have hospital records from- (A brief pause) You were drunk, rambling about how he would come home and be disappointed. A spotless room, your hands covered in his blood, but you weren't trying to hide him, you called 911. (A long pause) I did some research into your past, and your mother. She went missing when you were young, all of that history. Those tragedies, do you want to guess what I found when I dug closer into her disappearance? (A long beat) Still not going to talk? I wish I could change what happened to you, what he did to you, to your mother. The police and your neighbors think that your father killed her, but you know that don't you?

(Tape stalling.)

A: Even though your mom lost custody of you, she remained living with you. Is that correct? (A pause.) Yes, it's heartbreaking, but it is very common for a parent to use a child to hurt the other parent. The parent, that is. Which I suspect happened to your mother, before she left.

B: She didn't leave.

A: Then what happened? Your Testim-

B: (Faintly) I was just supposed to be a good girl.

A: What he did had nothing to do with you.

(Tape clicks.)

A: Even as a little girl you were made to testify in that case. That testimony, it wasn't true, was it? (A pause) No, I didn't think so. But your dad is to blame, not you. (A pause) It's not your fault. (A much longer beat.) Is that why you did it, vengeance?

(Tape stalls)

A: I don't mean to make you uncomfortable, but this means you have no family left. You killed the only person you had left. Then cleaned up his blood, but left his body in the spotless room. Without his body, if you hadn't confessed, you never would have been caught.

(There is a deep sigh from across the room. Person C finally speaks, but it's person B's voice, revealing the interviews to be the same person all along.)

C/B: I didn't mean to kill him, but he lay there begging and pleading, all I could see was me when I was little. He never stopped when I asked, he always said stopping was a coward's way out. He didn't raise a coward, nor did he raise a monster. I couldn't leave his room a mess when he got

home, he would've (A long pause) He wouldn't have liked me drinking, and... I can't disappoint him.

A: But you did murder him, in cold blood.

C/B: When can I go home?

A: They won't let you go home, you know that.

C/B: I need a break.

(The tape stops. It clicks on again)

A: Do you think he killed your mom?

C/B: I don't have to answer that.

A: (The tape stalls) I know, I'm sorry. Did you want to get straight back into the interview?

C/B: Sure

A: Walk me through that night. He had kicked you out, How did you get inside?

(At this point the audio files have collided, this last segment is the same recording from the first lines.)

Student Name: Arian Joshi  
Grade: 8  
School: Adams Junior High School  
Title: The Red Card  
Category: Novel Writing  
Key: Silver Key  
Educator: Brittany Setzekorn

"Ladies and gentleman, it's the end of one of the greatest games of football ever played in this stadium of London! England has just battled the French and won a well deserved world cup! Here comes the head referee with the trophy, and the team is pushing their top player, Henry Williams, forward. The record breaking crowd is screaming. The referee is handing it over to Henry! The whole team is practically on him. Wait! What's going on? The team is stepping away, and they have their hands over their mouths. Can I get a camera down ther-oh dear."

And the whole stadium gave out an echoing gasp and all went quiet. The star player of the new world champion team lay on the ground, dead.

It was about an hour ago when we got the call and rushed out. Yet another crime and we were sent to solve it with the whole country after us and-oh silly me I forgot to introduce myself. I am junior police detective Harry Cratchet, age 25. I've been on the force as part of the top investigation duo for a year now. The other man is Jonathan White, the cleverest, smartest, and most cunning man in all of England. Yes, I've been training under him for some time now and we've been on quite a lot of dangerous adventures.

But back to the point, we had been called by the chief police to get to the London football stadium at once. We were posted about half an hour away from the stadium and arrived there just as the last of the crowd had been escorted out. Mr. White strode up to the chief, with me tagging alongside him, as he asked for the reason for such a commotion. As he narrated the whole incident, Mr. White took careful notes and asked to go to the field. Soon, we were escorted into the stadium to the center of the field, where a white outline of a body had been made. Mr. White asked the officers to leave as he began to circle the outline. When the officers were out of earshot, I talked with Mr. White,

"An unnatural death in the middle of the arena of the largest international sporting event, in front of a crowd of almost 8000 people, and millions more on television, and no signs of any blood. Seems to me we might be investigating an act of the god." I said as I scanned the surrounding field in search of some weapon or clue.

"It does seem a bit far fetched, I suppose," Mr. White answered, "but I have learned from experience that the most impossible crimes are the ones that turn out as a success for the

criminal!" He knelt down to pick up some grass and tossed it aside. "Although, you are not wrong about the injuries Mr. Williams seems not to bear. When the first basic medical test was conducted, the results showed no traces of poison, bruises, or any other signs of bodily harm." He stood back up and started walking away. "Come along Harry, I doubt we will find anything useful here. I ran to his side obediently as we headed off the field and back to the office.

It had been a long night for the both of us. We had been up interrogating players of the teams, coaches, and referees. It took me all my strength to keep my eyes open and even Mr. White was beginning to lose his edge. By the time we finished all the interrogations, our desks were covered in coffee mugs. Mr. White and I started to go over all the details we had gathered.

"All the teammates say they were checked by security on the way in and had been cleared without issue, along with the coaches and the referees. In general, the security would have made any attempt on someone's life very difficult" I looked up from my notes and looked over to Mr. White, who was deep in thoughts.

"Yes, I completely agree with you. Was there anybody who held a grudge against Mr. Williams that we have recorded?" he questioned.

"Four people sir," I answered, "Assistant Coach Steinberg was caught nicking the head coach's office and Henry had snitched on him. Mrs. Williams is mad for catching Williams snogging another girl at a bar. His teammate Simon, who was supposed to be the team captain but had been turned down and lost that position to Henry. And lastly, Mr. Collins, who owed money to Henry and hated him for never forgetting it."

"All these seem to have probable enough causes to have the poor man murdered. We need to dig deeper into all four of these suspicious individuals and look for our criminal." With that he got up and strode to the door, and as always, me at his side.

We went to the London stadium once more to talk with the assistant coach and the football player. When we arrived, the practice was already in progress, but there was a feel of dread lingering in the air. We walked over to the assistant coach and flashed our badges at him. He immediately offered us his office to talk and we were seated comfortably at his desk. Mr. White began the interrogation.

"Mr. Steinberg, I understand you and the victim in question have had your disagreements in the past, so we came to see if you might have anything to do with the event."

"Why, how could you think that!" exclaimed the trainer with a genuine shock, "Henry was practically my son, we used to get along very well. Sure he told the coach of some things I had done, but it was the right thing to do from his perspective. I could never hurt such a prized player of my team and a dear friend for such a small cause!"

We decided to believe him and asked a few more questions about where on the field he was and if he saw anything suspicious, and let him go. We asked him to send in Simon, and a few minutes later, a tall and bearded man walked in through the door and plopped into the chair and spun around.

“And just to whom do I owe the pleasure of meeting?” he said in a lazy voice that had a hint of a sneer in it

“I’m Detective White and this is my assistant, Harry. We just wanted to know what you think of the... recent events.” He made sure his tone was more commanding to get the most amount of information out of Simon. Unfortunately, Simon seemed unfazed by this effort and continued to act as if he didn’t care.

“Yeah, poor Henry. Really didn’t deserve it. He was really nice and a good player too. Bummer he had to kick the bucket though. But, unfortunately, all good things have to come to an end.”

The way he said it almost made me lash out at him. He doesn’t even care that a human lost his life. I made myself calm down and tuned into the conversation once again.

“Was there any point in your career that you had a disagreement with Henry?” questioned Mr. White, in hopes of striking a nerve.

“Well, now that you mention it, he did take my spot as the team captain.” He looked as though he was trying to think back really hard. “Yeah, I was pretty pissed at him, but eventually I got over it. We became good buds again and played together.” After that, we let him go and headed out of the building.

Once we hopped in the car, Mr. White said, “Harry, I have arranged for us to meet Henry’s wife and the man who owed him money. What was his name again? Collins? So make sure to start the recording device once we get back so we can have all the conversation on the tape.”

We made it back to the office and called in Mrs. White to be interrogated. Once she was seated, we began to ask her some questions to which she gave satisfactory answers.

“I was at the game, you see,” she was saying, “when the team gathered around Henry, we couldn’t see much and when the team separated, I dropped to the floor, reduced to tears” towards the end, she was blubbing. We let her go and called Mr. Collins to step inside. We asked him what his connection was with Henry.

“We were old college buddies, you see, and I had asked for some money after I got fired from my factory job.” His voice boomed as he spoke, “And I was slowly paying him back, but the interest rate kept me in debt. I admit I wished he would have let me slide a couple quid, but we got along great over all. But one day, as I was heading over to his house to give him the money, I heard a guy talking to him through the door and he wasn’t very

happy. I heard Henry's voice call him by his name as he stormed off back into a jet black car, pretty sure it was some BMW that needed a major tune-up, just outside."

"What was the name?," asked Mr. White truly intrigued

"Now I am a little rusty in the head, but it was something like-

We were all on the edge of our seats, waiting for the name that could be our new lead, when it happened. The pop rattled my brain. Mr. White dove for cover. A light bulb burst spraying all of us in shattered glass. I made a dive over the desk and immediately balled up. Two more pops rang out and all was silent. I cautiously stood on my knees and peeked over the desk. Glass and papers blanketed the floor. And in the middle of it, was Mr. Collins, lying dead on the floor and blood oozing out of the three holes in the back of his head.

After the ambulance had left along with most of the police personnel, Mr. White and I got our heads together once more and discussed what had just happened.

"So the shots were in the back of the head, meaning whoever it was had shot through the open window. They must have walked off because there was never a sound of an engine or a motor after the dark deed. In addition to this escape, no camera had caught the mystery man and the escape was a slick one. The bullets found in the head were long, meaning the murderer had used a sniper to kill. The only thing I don't get is the man died just before the name had been revealed. I suspect the murderer has the room bugged and is listening at this very moment."

I nodded my head along with what he said and looked around the room at the mention of a bug. I was thinking if the murderer, the man at Henry's door, and Henry's murderer are all one and the same person. So the murderer must've known that Collins was being interrogated at this very moment. But to know this, they would have to have access to our office or phones. And how had they killed Henry? All these theories circulated in my brain as we left the office and headed to our cars.

"We have had quite a day, haven't we? Investigating a murder and stumbling over yet another one. A good night's sleep should replenish our energy."

And with that he hopped into the car, offering me a ride back to my apartment.

We were peacefully driving down a small road listening to the police chatter, hoping for something interesting for distraction. As if it appeared out of thin air, a car raced by us almost sending us into a lamppost. Mr. White immediately regained control and brought us back in our lane. He was mumbling about teenage drivers when something flashed into my memory.

I connected all the dots and told Mr. White about the car Collins described. A wide grin spread across his face as we sped into the night, in hopes of finding the man who had committed two murders in two days.

We followed the trail of oil back to the stadium. We left the car in the parking lot and found the security gate with a hole cut into it. We headed inside and decided to try the locker rooms first, and walked in. We felt around for a light switch and flipped it on, illuminating the white tile plated room. We cased the whole room, but found nothing. I was running my finger over the lockers on the way out when I heard a faint buzzing sound coming from one of them. I called Mr. White over. Together we pried open the locker and looked inside.

"It all makes sense now! The murder, the means, the motive, it all connects!" He turned on his heel and left the room, with me at his right, leaving the huge trophy behind

We ran out onto the field to exit the stadium, when gunshots rang out. All around us, grass and dirt erupted as bullets rained down. We made a zig-zag run back to the side lines, dived over the boundary line. I risked a peek over the edge to see a hooded figure up in the stand with something in his hands, most likely a gun. There was dead silence for about a whole minute till the dark figure began his descent down the stairs, still keeping his gun aimed in our direction. He fired a few more shots, at which point I fell back behind the cover of the metal boundary and when I looked back over, he had disappeared. Knowing the coast was clear, I slinked across the field, leaving Mr. White behind the boundary. After confirming he was no longer there, I tore across the field after him, knowing another chance to uncover the killer would not present itself any time soon.

I made it out of the stadium and ran towards a new set of headlights. The black car. I made it just in time to see the culprit trying to back up out of his parking spot. I pulled out my service revolver - Mr. White had given it to me when I first joined the force, just a small short ranced pistol - and shot at the car. To my surprise, I heard the satisfying pop of the tire as the bullet found its target. I was about 20 feet away when the man jumped out of his car and fired his semi-automatic. I made yet another dive for cover behind a random parked car and covered my head as the loud Rat-a-tat-a-tat-a of the bullets heavily dented the car, but could not penetrate the metal. I risked a peak past the tire. The killer had taken off in the opposite direction. I started chasing him and shot after him, the bullets missing him by mere inches. He wrenched his hand back and shot at me back, but all his shots went wide. He was nearing the exit when a whole squadron of police cars came up and cut off the exit with Mr. White leading them. They smashed the gate and made a perfect circle around him as cops filtered out with pistols trained on him. He looked around looking for some escape route, but found none and dropped his gun in defeat. Two cops came up and handcuffed the masked man and pushed him down on his knees. Mr. White walked to the center and I once again ran to his side. We walked up to the man and to my surprise, Mr. White announced, "Simon, you are now under arrest for the murder of Henry Williams and Mr. Collins." and he lifted his mask off and there was Simon, growling in anger.

It has been 2 days since the uncovering of Simon and Mr. White and I have been through many congratulations and parties from the governor to the team coach. Apparently, Mr.

Collins' old factory job was at a metal toy factory, and Simon had asked him to make a fake world cup trophy for fun. He then implanted a special remote controlled battery pack that when activated would send a lethal shock through anybody holding it. He then hid it in his locker and came to retrieve it later, where we intercepted him. He had told Mr. Collins to keep quiet, but he had double crossed him by killing Mr. Collins to protect his own secret. All in all, everything was put back in order and Simon was sent to jail for two murders, attempted murders, and several other crimes he had committed along the way. Mr. White and I were relieved to finally have some down time. We were going to go play a good game of golf - what's this? Famous movie director's child kidnaped? So much for down time. We're going on another adventure!

Student Name: Carolyn Liu  
Grade: 8  
School: Seven Lakes Junior High School  
Title: To Open Myself  
Category: Science Fiction & Fantasy  
Key: Silver Key  
Educator: Katelyn Deiss

Allegra of Winterhaven was invisible, and today was no different. She sat virtually unknown in the back of the Potions and Poisons classroom, silently taking notes. In the front, Professor Summers prattled enthusiastically about the identification of spittleleaf fruits and how one can use them in various tonics. Students copied down notes their teacher wrote on the blackboard and whispered to each other.

Her mint-green notebook was open in front of her, magically formatting jumbled information as Allegra concentrated on projecting notes through her Mindspace in its elegant script. She had a stronger Mindspace than most, allowing her the luxury of being one of few students at the Whispering Woods Academy able to abandon quill and ink and instead, take notes using the mind.

As her notes projected onto the page, Allegra noticed a boy, Devan, glaring venomously at her. He was strangling the shaft of his goose-feather quill, causing ink to leak from the pen and bleed throughout the thin pages of his notebook. Allegra shrunk away from Devan's poisonous stare and reverted her attention to the flowing words spreading across the pages.

Why, why, why, she thought sullenly, tugging her strawberry blonde plait and wringing her hands, feeling hated and alone. At twelve, Allegra was a painfully shy first-year at the Whispering Woods Academy, with nose always buried in a book and personality a stark contrast from her lively name.

She was constantly bullied when she was younger for being a "bookworm" and a "nobody"; becoming more of a castoff when she unlocked her Mindspace at an abnormally young age; for this, professors took a favour of her while she was despised and envied by her peers. Therefore, she did what she believed easiest. She tried to become invisible.

It worked most of the time. Allegra sat alone at lunch and assemblies, never spoke to other students, and usually did projects alone. Students stopped bothering her, and many children forgot Allegra even existed.

Other times, Allegra lamented, despondently thinking of Devan, it was a lot easier said than done.

“Who would like to tell me one way any part of the spittleleaf can be hexed?” Professor Summers chirped in her exuberant sing-song, tossing her waist-length, platinum blonde braid over her shoulder.

Allegra blinked back to attention, silently berating herself for letting herself get distracted, and timidly forced her arm to rise. Whatever happened wouldn’t prevent her from attempting to be a good student. The professor smiled at her and raised a hand to quiet the students.

“Class, Ms. Winterhaven has the floor,” she announced sternly. She turned to Allegra and motioned for her to speak.

“The juice of the fruit, if hexed with a willingly given drop of blood, will turn into a poison that burns any organic thing, making it a popular assassination weapon used by bandits outside of the Woods,” Allegra said quietly.

Her professor looked pleased, but Allegra heard a student mumble “know-it-all”; and she ducked her head, cheeks burning.

She didn’t speak again for the rest of class.

\* \* \*

At lunch, Allegra sat alone. She sat at an isolated table at the corner of the cafeteria, a novel opened in front of her as students chattered noisily.

During the long thirty minutes of lunch, Allegra would feel off somehow, like there was a missing piece to her puzzle. Nothing could make Allegra feel better; no matter what she did, she couldn’t help but notice the gaping hole. She just couldn’t figure out what was missing.

“Can I sit here?”

Allegra looked up, startled out of her train of thought, and saw Luna of Elvendale smiling at her. The girl had wavy black hair pulled into a loose ponytail, azure eyes, and she had revised her forest-green school uniform by sewing several cut black onyxes into her belt and ironing a thin layer of silvery fairy dust to her school jacket. Everyone around Allegra’s deserted table stopped their conversation to gawk shamelessly at Luna, whispering admiringly.

“Oh, me?”

"Yes, can I sit here?" Luna repeated, seemingly oblivious to the many pairs of eyes on her.

What. Allegra blinked her washed-out violet eyes. Luna was the most popular girl in all of Whispering Woods Academy. Her family was very rich and her estate, Elvendale, was incredibly luxurious. Her brother had graduated from the Academy a year earlier as Class Captain, and based on her current performance at school, Luna seemed to be heading along a similar path. Everyone wanted to be friends with her.

"Sure, I guess..." Allegra peeped hesitantly. What did Luna want with a nobody like her?

Luna grinned, plopping down her tray next to Allegra's and sitting down. Allegra wrung her hands, not knowing what to do.

"Allegra of Winterhaven, right?"

Allegra startled. "How did you know?"

Luna picked up her sandwich. "We're in the same Astronomy. Personally, you're kinda hard not to notice. All the professors love you. You're also the first to raise your hand, and your grades are always top in class. So...it'd be strange if I didn't know who you are."

"Oh..." Allegra fidgeted. Apparently, she wasn't as unknown as she'd like.

"What book is that?"

Allegra jerked her head up again. Luna gestured at the novel in front of Allegra with genuine interest. Allegra peered behind the girl to see dozens of people glaring at her, green with envy.

"Oh, um..." Allegra showed Luna the cover. "The Trial."

Luna's eyes lit up. "You've read it too? It's one of my favourites!"

Allegra blinked. Was Luna just trying to be nice?

But as the girl started jabbering about her favourite characters and ranting on and on about how the main character should've ended up with that guy, Allegra felt herself relax. Luna genuinely wanted to hang out with her.

"Do you want to come over?" Luna asked all of a sudden. "I have nothing to do except for Arithmetic homework."

"Sure, I...guess I could ask my mom?" Allegra blinked and her reply came out like a question. She toyed with her fingers. She'd never been to someone's house before.

Luna didn't seem to mind Allegra's awkward reply. She only smiled hopefully.

After lunch, Allegra beamed as she scurried off to History of Magic.

Because she made a friend.

\* \* \*

After class, Allegra met Luna in the hall. She had sent her messenger sparrow to her mother to ask if she could go to Luna's house, and her mother, excited that her daughter had made a friend, had immediately given her consent.

"My mom said I could come as long as I leave before Sunset," Allegra said, smiling. "I'm flying home with you, right?"

Luna's eyes seemed to dim.

"I guess you can send your swan ahead, and you can walk to my house with me," she said slowly.

Allegra blinked in surprise. "You don't have a swan?"

Luna seemed to shrink as she nodded.

Out of everyone in the Woods, I'd think Luna is most likely to have a swan, Allegra thought, but she decided not to press her friend.

"I'll walk with you," Allegra said. "I can send my swan to your house beforehand."

Luna's azure eyes lit up again.

"Thanks," she said sheepishly. "See you after school?"

Before Allegra could nod, Luna briskly walked off to her next class like she was in a hurry.

Why doesn't Luna have a swan? Allegra thought. She sighed. Whatever reason it was, her friend didn't want her to know.

\* \* \*

After school, as everyone flew away from campus, Luna and Allegra started towards Elvendale through a path through the forest.

Allegra didn't talk much during the walk, not really knowing what to say. She just walked by Luna's side and wrung her hands.

"Della and Bea wanted to come over today." Luna made a face that looked as if she swallowed a slug, and Allegra laughed. "I have to count to ten every time I speak with them, so don't ask why I do."

Allegra smiled, yet a question weighed her down.

“Why don’t you have a swan?” she said abruptly.

Luna flinched.

“N-Not that you have to tell me,” Allegra quickly added, shrinking away from Luna, hoping she didn’t hurt the girl’s feelings.

“No, it’s okay. But you’re certainly awkward,” laughed Luna, clear and ringing. She then looked at Allegra, as if she was calculating her possible reactions. “I never got one,” she finally said, voice flat and monotone. “They never really liked me, my parents.”

Allegra’s mouth went dry. She turned to Luna, who kept speaking.

“I’ve tried to make them proud of me, but they never do. It’s like no matter what I do, they won’t ever love me. Like I’m not their daughter. My brother’s the only thing they could ever ask for, but not me.”

Luna finally turned to Allegra, who was rooted in place, not knowing what to say. Clearly, the conversation had strayed from swans.

“I guess I said too much,” Luna mumbled. Bile coated Allegra’s tongue and she swallowed uncomfortably, feeling too many things at once.

Crestfallen that some people were capable of not loving their own children, livid that Luna had to endure this for so long... but most of all, stupefied that Luna would choose to share something so personal with her.

“Why did you tell me that?” Allegra said softly.

Luna shrugged, tearing a dead leaf that had fallen into her palm. “I just felt like I had to.” She let the pieces of leaf flutter to the forest floor. Allegra looked on, feeling just as shredded.

How do you comfort someone when you don’t know what they’re going through?

So Allegra just walked to Luna’s side and awkwardly patted her shoulder.

“I’m sorry,” she said slowly.

“Don’t be,” Luna replied, looking out into the distance. “It’s not your fault. And I’m sorry too. I shouldn’t have told you so much. You must be feeling very uncomfortable right now.”

Allegra thought about what to say next. She decided to go with pure honesty.

“I really don’t know what you’re going through, and I’m not sure I can help...” She paused. “But I guess...you have...me?” She then clamped her mouth shut. That sounded better in my head.

But Luna turned to her and smiled sadly, yet somewhat relieved.

"Yeah," she said, the corners of her mouth tugging upward. "I do."

She hugged Allegra, who blinked in surprise.

"Thank you," Luna whispered into Allegra's ear. "Thank you for being my friend."

5 years later...

Allegra's palms were clammy with sweat as she raised the point of the Mages' sword over the sapphire.

She thrust it down...

"You have no right!"

...and the blade stopped a sliver short.

Luna of Ravenfield, bound by ropes of light, thrashed against her bonds, face contorted with inhuman rage.

"You have no right!" she repeated. Allegra, hands shaking, dropped the sword, blade clattering onto the ground. She looked into Luna's feral eyes.

"You took everything from me!" Luna cried. "You killed the only people that would ever love me, destroyed the only place I could call home, and took my true love and made him yours. And now you're going to take my life. You don't deserve to!"

Tears streamed down Allegra's porcelain face.

"You're making me seem evil, Luna."

Luna's eyes flashed. "How else can you describe yourself? Heroic? After all you've done?"

A surge of defiance rushed through Allegra's veins. "Those people didn't love you, Luna! They were evil, and they were manipulating you. I had Ravenfield destroyed to free you! Keep yourself as 'Luna of Ravenfield' for all I care, but that ghastly fortress was never your home!"

"Then what of Arthur?" Luna challenged. "What's your flimsy excuse for taking him from me?"

Allegra took a deep breath. Arthur was the greatest rift between them. "He never loved you, Luna. He knew that you were never meant to be true loves. But I never tried to take

him from you, Luna, really. We just... fell in love. Even so, I'm sorry, Luna. I really, truly am."

"So my destiny is with no one?" Luna cried. "So no one loved me and no one ever will?"

Allegra stepped forward, wiping away tears with the back of her hand.

"No, Luna. You have me; you've always had me. And I will always love you."

Luna shook her head. "I needed more than friendship, Alle. I needed true love." She levelled her eyes with Allegra's. "More than just you."

"I know," Allegra whispered. "I once thought you were the only person I needed. You and me, us against the world. Then I realised I needed more than you too." She smiled tearfully. "But our friendship was more important than anything else to me, Luna, and it still is. I don't want to do this, but I have to. The evil has taken over too much of you. This is the only way to save you!"

Eyelashes wet, Allegra bent down and picked up the sword. Luna's eyes widened in panic.

"No!" she screamed, flailing with the desperation of a fish out of water. "You can't kill me!"

Allegra gripped the sword firmly and stared deep into Luna's eyes. The eyes of her best friend and her worst enemy. Her soul sister, a love so deep she had once thought their bond could never be broken. But as she looked into Luna's once glimmering, vivacious eyes, she only saw two flat pools of blue staring back at her. She couldn't see the effervescent, outgoing girl that had once inhabited that body. She couldn't see the trademark grin or the spirited energy. She couldn't see Luna.

Because Luna was too gone now. Completely swallowed up by the evil that had taken control.

Allegra was crying hard, sobs racking her body. Her hands trembled violently.

"I'm sorry," she whispered. She reached out and grasped the hilt of the sword.

Luna had lost her defiance. She simply looked at Allegra and said, "you can't kill me."

Allegra lifted her head, vision blurred with tears. Then she understood everything.

She is a caged bird. You must set her free from the grasp of this evil.

"I'm not killing you," Allegra said, words meant for both of them. She stood up on shaky legs and lifted the sword over the deep blue sapphire once again, staring at her tearful reflection in the pale metal.

"I'm setting you free."

"No!" Luna thrust out a hand, but it was too late.

It was like slow motion. Allegra slammed the sword into the sapphire, the jewel bursting into a million pieces, shards flying everywhere and dissipating. Luna screamed and clawed at her throat as a deep-blue tendril snaked out of her mouth and fell pathetically onto the ground. It flopped around helplessly before dissolving into the earth, gone.

As she let the blade fall away, Allegra watched Luna as the light bonds shimmered away. Her friend collapsed and slowly raised her head. It was as if a fog had lifted from Luna's eyes.

"Allegra?" she breathed.

Allegra gasped, face streaked with tears. Perhaps Luna's life wouldn't have to be taken! "Luna!" she cried, running to her friend, who was lying on the ground. She crouched down next to Luna and brushed away strands of hair obscuring her eyes. "You're alive." A joyous sob erupted from her lips.

Luna smiled sadly at Allegra.

"I don't want to be Luna of Ravenfield anymore, or Luna of Elvendale. You were right: I couldn't call those places home. But...if it can be arranged... could I share a name with you?" The light in Luna's eyes danced mournfully.

Allegra grasped her friend's hand and beamed. "Luna of Winterhaven. It's beautiful. Now stand up, and let's go back. I've missed you, Luna."

But Luna didn't budge. Allegra's smile melted away as she stared at Luna, worry and confusion scrawled across her face.

"Luna?" she asked uneasily.

"You were right, Alle," Luna said softly. "When you destroyed the Core of Corruption and killed the malice combined into me, I realised that you can't remove the evil without taking away my own Core. I chose not to reject the malevolence, and it became me. And if you kill the evil..."

"Wait, no!" Allegra cried, understanding.

"I love you, Alle."

"I love you too, Luna.." Allegra squeezed her soul sister's hand and wept. "Please don't leave me. I need you."

"We both knew I would die. I'm not leaving you, Alle. I'm just taking the first step and meeting my fate."

"You're so brave, Luna," Allegra sobbed. "I've always admired that in you."

"There's courage in both of us. You saved my life, after all." Luna's eyes started to glaze over, gazing toward the realm beyond. "Stay strong, Alle...and thank you."

"No! No!" Allegra cried. "Please, I just got you back!"

Her best friend reached out and touched Allegra's face with her fingertips. Then, she exhaled one last time, and her eyes dimmed. Her arm fell limp at her side.

Luna of Winterhaven never moved again.

Allegra just sat there, watching her sister, waiting for her to twitch, to sit up, to smile. But she knew the truth.

After a moment, Luna was engulfed in a soft glow. Allegra leapt up with a gasp, but Luna's body only glowed brighter and brighter, until it disappeared, leaving no trace of the girl.

If one passes and their body vanishes to be one with the stars, it means their life is truly complete, Professor Zika had once said. This is a rarity, and means the person no longer bears unfinished regrets. When it is my time, I will not ascend to the universe; there are too many unfinished things for me to complete. Too much for only one lifetime.

Allegra numbly stood up. She sheathed her sword and stumbled back to the Whispering Woods, where her triumphant army awaited her, but she felt no reason to celebrate.

Because Luna was gone.

But Allegra knew her best friend was free.

Student Name: Alexandru Enciu  
Grade: 8  
School: Doerre Intermediate School  
Title: A Normal Day  
Category: Science Fiction & Fantasy  
Key: Silver Key  
Educator: Melissa Reisdorf

### Chapter 1: On the Run

It was February 11, 2053 and I was running away as fast as I could. The wind fiercely whipped my face, cutting a thousand invisible cuts, as I sprinted, hoping that I wouldn't be struck down. The gun shots were echoing off the mountain sides, ricocheting, injecting me with adrenaline. One bullet hit me in the leg and I fell. I continued to crawl but they were catching up, only about 100 meters behind. I crawled as fast as I could and, then I felt a sharp pain, heard some muffled voices and everything became black.

### Chapter 2: An Interesting Day

On February 4, 2053 I was leisurely walking in one of New York's rarely found deserted streets, on my daily routine. Getting a coffee in the neighborhood Starbucks, walking to work, greeting the office admin, putting in my hours, grabbing a sandwich from the corner bistro for lunch, leaving at the appropriate time, coming home and cooking dinner, and spending time playing video games. Nothing unusual, nothing special, I screamed "regular guy" all around. Nothing anticipated what was to follow. On February 4, I was on my way home. It was a pleasant day, as February goes, and I was bundled up in my coat, inhaling the clean air and praying rain wouldn't start before I got home. Passing by a hedgerow, something grabbed my attention. A small black box peaked from the hedgerow, with a bright yellow writing on the side, that spelled something unintelligible. Without thinking, glancing around me, I grabbed it and quickly put it in my bag and ran home. As soon as I got home, curiosity got the best of me. I took it out of my bag and opened the box.

### Chapter 3: The "Scientific Device"

Imagine my surprise when I opened the box and there was a glass cube with a glowing sphere inside. I was most surprised to see that the following words were engraved on the glass, "The Immortal Sphere" in plain English lettering. I was quite in shock. The device seemed quite innocuous, glowing peacefully, but an uneasy feeling permeated me. I was

unsure if I should turn it in to the authorities or keep it, and in the end, I decided to hide it in my safe and ponder on it the next day.

#### Chapter 4: The Appearance of The Protector

After a few days, during which I ignored the device completely, I heard a knock at my door. I opened it and there was a man in a black cloak and wearing dark glasses. "Matrix looking dude" I thought. He stated that he was a government official and that I had stolen something of importance to the government. I was confused, but then remembered the box. I said "Wait here!" and went to get it. Once I got the box he asked me "Do you know what is in the box, and did you tell anyone about it?" He had a quite mechanical and unemotional voice. I answered, "Yes, I SAW what is in the box, and no, I did not tell anyone about it." "Okay," he said while taking his hood and sunglasses off. "It does not belong to the government." "It was created by a bright and forward looking scientist a long time ago" he monotoned, "and I am the last living protector of the Immortal Sphere." The only time he showed any emotion was when he said the words "immortal sphere." I was puzzled and asked him "Why are you a protector? What are you protecting it from?" He responded "I am protecting it from Them." I followed "Who is them?"; and he responded "They are the people higher than any government position you know off, and they want to make copies of it and give it to their enhanced armies to conquer the world." That seemed far-fetched and out of a crazy movie, so asked him why They wanted to rule the world, but he did not respond. He told me "Since you know too much already, you sir, have to come with me." He also said " My name is Alowy and I am the last Protector of The Immortal Sphere." I responded meekly with "I am Alex".

#### Chapter 5: The Announcement

That very next day there was an announcement on the radio. It broadcasted that the first person to find and provide concrete information to authorities about a brown-haired man with green eyes wearing a black cloak would get one million dollars in reward. With a jolt, I immediately realized that the person in question was Alowy, the man who had unexpectedly shown up at my door the day before, and who was, currently, still hiding at my place. He was in no way surprised by the broadcast, and was thoughtfully studying me, to see if I would turn him in.

#### Chapter 6: The Chase Begins

It was February 8 and Alowy and I quickly packed our things. We needed to go somewhere far away, and do it fast, keeping a low profile. Alowy informed me that he had a private jet from the previous Protector. He asked where we should go, though why he asked me, I

have no idea. I suggested we go to South America in the Amazon rainforest because I have a property that can double as shelter over there. We quickly rushed to a small local airport, boarded the plane, and a few hours later arrived in the Amazon rainforest. Along with food, water, and other supplies, we had two rifles, pistols, and a lot of rounds. The plane had obviously been stocked by someone knowledgeable, but who it was, I would never know, as apart from the two of us, the pilot was the only other person onboard.

#### Chapter 7: "Them"

We had settled in the shelter for about one day when They arrived. There were about twenty of them. Two leaders, and eighteen soldiers. We hid behind some trees, but they had a few trained dogs that could smell us out. Following a page out of a Rambo playbook, we quickly applied mud all over us to cover our scents. One of the dogs started to trot towards us and stopped right at our feet, sniffed for a bit then started to bark ferociously. They immediately turned towards our hiding spot and trained their rifles on us. We sprang and started to run as fast as we could. I had planned for this eventuality and I told Alowy to follow me, and he did. We ran towards a small shack that had a basement we could hide in and attempt to draw them in. The door was well camouflaged and we managed to slip inside just in the nick of time. The second we closed the basement hatch we heard the front door open and we froze. I made hand gestures to Alowy, showing that we would open the hatch very little and use our rifles to shoot at them. Alowy understood and we proceeded. We lifted the hatch slowly and noiselessly with the barrel of our guns and pointed and started to fire. Somehow, we managed to get rid of all of them. We knew at this moment we needed to get back to the plane, and fast.

#### Chapter 8: The Way Back

We got out of the shack and started to run back towards the small hangar where the plane had been parked the day of our arrival. I was carrying "The Immortal Sphere" in my pocket, but I was seriously doubting the wisdom of that. As we approached the plane, we noticed 2 guards by it. We both simultaneously pulled our pistols and fired. Both guards fell. We boarded the plane and that's when Alowy informed me he had a magical map to guide us to the previous Protector's base, a map that only reveals itself in times of extreme need. I guess this was our time of extreme need! Our journey was taking us to Nanortalik, Greenland.

#### Chapter 9: The Map

When we arrived in Nanortalik, Alowy pulled out the map again; it had been worn down by age, crinkly, and yellowed at the edges, the markings barely visible. We had completed

the first step which was getting to Nanortalik, Greenland. It showed a faint smoky trace on the map. The second step was to get to the Helheim Glacier. We got on our way in a taxi going as far as our pooled money could take us. We made it about fifteen miles before we reached the glacier. Despite our grumbling, the taxi driver indicated he would drive us no longer unless we paid him, so we reluctantly stepped out in the frigid air and continued the arduous hiking on foot. The tongue of the glacier finally appeared before us, the ice surrounding us with its invigorating smell. Just as we stepped on the glacier, the map illuminated the next path. We were to head towards three jagged peaks and arrive there just as the sun was rising. The howling wind was our single companion, with the bitter cold cutting down to the bone. We trekked all the way, till we reached the bottom of the middle of the three jagged peaks. It was just the right time. The rising sun hit the middle peak at such an angle that it revealed a series of ledges going up the mountain. We followed them and ended right at the entrance to a cave. The map burst into flames like a Phoenix and reformed with bright letters saying "You have arrived at the Protectors' cave!" At that same moment, I turned around and saw at the bottom of the glacier, heavily armed soldiers and realized we had been pursued this entire time. They had arrived! We quickly entered the cave and placed the Sphere on the pedestal in the middle of the cave and then a wall dropped, separating us from the Sphere. Down below, the soldiers had begun their climb and we realized that we were trapped. It was February 11, 2053.....

Student Name: Kaden Brumfield

Grade: 11

School: Klein Oak High School

Title: A Procrastinator's Lament

Category: Poetry

Key: Silver Key

Educator: Linda Billings

Why, oh why, is there so much to do  
I can't help but to push it back until later  
I promised myself I'll do it tomorrow  
I said that again today

Why, oh why, does the clock keep ticking  
The Earth won't stop spinning,  
Time keeps moving on  
And leaves me behind

Why, oh why, does time move so fast  
Minutes turn to hours, hours turn to days  
Days to weeks, weeks to years  
Soon, I'll have no time to do anything

Why, oh why, do I lose my grasp  
I can't hold on to the constant work  
I can feel myself slipping,  
Until I just fall into nothingness

Why, oh why, can't I just pass

Everything used to be easy

I was a genius

When did everything become so difficult

Why, oh why, does everything have to collide

I can't finish everything at once

I can't do Algebra while writing a paper.

I'm just... not good enough

Why, oh why, do I have to write an end

An end to these thoughts

...

I'll just finish it tomorrow

Student Name: Leah Roth  
Grade: 8  
School: Schindewolf Intermediate School  
Title: Across the World For You  
Category: Science Fiction & Fantasy  
Key: Silver Key  
Educator: Leanne Pope

I wake up in a different place every day. Part of it is almost relaxing knowing I can start my life over as many times as I like. I was thirteen when I first discovered I had teleporting powers. Soon after, I realized I teleported every night at midnight and I couldn't control where. Some people might think of it as a superpower, but I would call it an annoying curse. I have been an orphan for most of my life. My mom and dad died in a car crash when I was five months old, so I never had to worry about missing my family. I also never had to worry about money because I got their grand inheritance. I've gotten used to waking up on the side of a street or in a coffee shop across the world, I've had to deal with it for two years now. The first time I teleported, I remember falling asleep in the orphanage bed and waking up to a stranger tapping on my forehead in a grocery store. I was so confused, I thought someone picked me up and moved me. I later found out that I indeed wasn't being carried because I moved across the world to Ireland in a matter of seconds. Over the years I have had many days I go without eating or sleeping, but if I get lucky, families feed me and let me live with them for the day. It all depends on the place I land in. Fast forward two years to the present time, I am now fifteen, have no home, and traveling the world by myself. Today I happened to land in Kingston, Canada in somebody's backyard. The guy in the kitchen was wearing an apron and had a mixing bowl in his hands. He looks toward me, great. He starts walking to the door, the look on his face eases my nervousness. As he opens the door, a rush of cool breeze blows his wavy dark hair into his eyes. He pushes it to the side as he smiles and cocks his head to the side with a questioning look on his face. He starts approaching me, and as he gets closer and closer, I realize how tall he is, even though he looks about sixteen. "Do you need something...uh what's your name?" he said in a calm yet curious tone. "Daniella," I said, shocked that he wasn't mad that I was in his backyard. "Do you need something Daniella," he said once again. "No." I said in a sheepish voice before running to the gate and struggling with the jiggly gate lock. "You have to pull it toward you." he whispered, I almost jumped. I didn't realize how close he was. I hurried as I nervously opened the gate and ran to the street. "Nice meeting you, Daniella!" He shouted as he watched me run away. My heart was beating so fast that I couldn't think and I unconsciously ran to the nearest coffee shop. I was collecting my thoughts over a nice cold iced coffee when I heard the bell on top of the door ring and I instantly looked at the door. To my surprise, the apron guy walks into the shop. I slouch in my seat in hopes of him not seeing me.

"Boo." He says sarcastically as he sits across from me. "Did you follow me here?" I said, still in shock that he was sitting with me. "No ... okay, maybe" he admitted as he looked around. "I just realized you don't know my name. My name is Alex, nice to formally meet you." he said as he stuck his hand out for me to shake it. I hesitated, but I grabbed it and shook it. "So, do you come here often Daniella?" he asked as he looked around the coffee shop. "Um.. no," I stammered "I just moved here." " Oh, that's why I haven't seen you around. I should take you on a tour of the town. Come on!" he insisted as he grabbed my hand and pulled me out of the seat. I didn't even have time to grab my coffee as we flew out the door. He spent the rest of the day showing me all around town and we ended up at the local park. We sat on the park bench and spent at least an hour getting to know each other. I don't know what it was but I felt a spark between us. "I have to go eat dinner," he said as our conversation came to a close, "but it was really fun being with you today. See you tomorrow?" he said before he started running off before I could tell him that I indeed would not see him tomorrow. I lay down on the soft grass beside a tree I was planning to make my bed for the night. I closed my eyes and reminisced about today as I drifted off to sleep. The next morning I was on top of a restaurant. For a minute, I was so focused on yesterday, that I forgot I teleported each night. I started climbing down the stairs on the side of the building. "Hey! Get down!" one of the staff members screamed as I jumped off and ran as fast as I could. I hid next to the dumpster behind the restaurant. I stayed there for 10 minutes as I collected my thoughts and made sure he was gone. I picked up my tired body and slowly walked toward the street. Across it, waves are roaring and calling me to come near. I run to the water, fully clothed and I let the waves swallow me whole. I float on top of the water thinking about yesterday, thinking about Alex, and thinking about how I should have told him I would never see him again. I guess I was floating like that for a while because when I looked up, I had drifted off about 100 yards. I slowly start dog paddling to shore and collapse on the soft sand. I must have fallen asleep because I woke up to the water tickling my toes. The sun was about to set so I decided to just fall back asleep, it seemed like the most appealing option even though I sleeping all day. I woke up to the summer sun shining in my eyes as the smell of coffee grinds wafts up my nose. I was in a coffee shop that seemed familiar but I couldn't put my finger on it until someone walked in the door. It was Alex. I watch as he starts making his way toward the table we sat at two days ago. My head was spinning with questions; Why did I teleport to the same place? That has never happened before. Why is Alex here? Why is he sitting in our seat? I decide to shut out all the questions and take a deep breath. I slowly walk over to him and slide into the seat across from him. His face lights up but quickly turns into confusion. "Where were you yesterday? I thought we were going to meet up again." He nervously admits as he looks at his shaking hands. I stare into space as I consider telling him about my curse. "Hello?" he said impatiently, 'Uh sorry, I was... unpacking." I lied. "Oh. Well did you maybe want to hang out today?" he said with a smile on his face. Before I even utter a sound, he grabs my hand and we fly out the door. It gave me deja vu from a couple of days ago when we first met. I try to keep up with him as we dash past people in the streets. He gave me a warm look that forced me to smile. We get to the park

and he unexpectedly goes behind a tree and grabs a basket. He places it on the luscious grass and starts unraveling a blanket. "Well are you just gonna stand there?" he asked while I stared blankly at him. "W-w-what is this for?" I stammered as he started pulling out fruits, sandwiches, cakes, and a bunch of other snacks I couldn't recognize. "Will you just come to help me, curious George?" he persists. Stunned by what he just called me, I start helping him spread out the blanket, which almost looks like it is floating over the tall grass. We finished laying out all the food which now looks like a fancy buffet on a blanket, which it technically is. "So, will you tell me what all of this is about now?" I asked impatiently. "I just wanted to do something nice for you. I really like you Daniella." he admits blushing as he looks to the ground to try and hide it. I'm still like a deer in headlights. I have never had anyone say this to me before, I didn't think he felt the same way. Do I tell him I like him too? What if it is a joke? How do I tell him about my teleporting powers? My head was spinning and it was clearly showing. "Dani ...?" his voice was shaking. "I I-like you too, but I have something to tell you." I said visibly shaking, "The real reason I wasn't here yesterday wasn't because I was unpacking. But instead, I have teleportation powers, well it's really a curse. Every night at midnight I teleport to a new place around the world. I can't control it, I never know where I might end up, and I can't take anything with me. I wanted to stay with you yesterday but I didn't know how to explain that I would never see you again. Or so I thought because I have never teleported to the same place multiple times, except today. Is it a coincidence? I think not, so I knew I had to tell you. I know that is a lot to take in but please understand." It felt like 1,000 pounds was off my chest. "Oh. That's why you weren't here yesterday?" he said in an unexpectedly calm voice. "Uh, you're not shocked? Normally when I tell people, they can't believe me or they say I'm lying." I said, still baffled by how he reacted. "Well I don't see why anyone would lie about something like that, I trust you." he said in the most sincere voice I have ever heard. "Although, I have to ask, do you ever get to see your family?" he asked with a concerned tone. "My parents actually died when I was a baby so I have been an orphan my whole life. I started teleporting when I was 13 so I have had to deal with this curse for two years now." I explained. "That must take a toll on you physically and mentally. Wait, does that mean I will never see you again if you always teleport to a different place?" he asked quietly. "Yes, sadly." I said looking down, "Well, we should make the most of our last day. The sun is setting, how about I stay with you here until you teleport." he replied. We stayed up all night, laughing and telling each other all the experiences we had. It was the best night of my life until it reached one minute til midnight. We both knew this was the last time we would see each other. He held my hand as we watched the clock tick down. As it hits the last seconds, I say "So long, we will meet again one day." He squeezes my hand and I tense my body to prepare for the teleport. The earth turns quiet. I open my eyes, and sitting in front of me is Alex. It is seconds after midnight, yet I am still here. We both can't believe it. We start jumping up and down and dancing joyfully with each other. "I knew you were the one for me Alex, I just knew it! You broke my curse!" I cheered with the biggest smile on my face. "Oh, Daniella I love you." he cries out as he gives me a warm embrace. "I love you too." I reply as we fall back onto

our blanket. I fell asleep with a smile on my face, knowing that I had finally found the person that I would travel across the world for.

Student Name: Victoria Hawkins  
Grade: 8  
School: Krimmel Intermediate School  
Title: Alone  
Category: Poetry  
Key: Silver Key  
Educator: Lisa Liessmann

People come and go like rainbows.

People these days only like when it's sunny but when it's raining no one knows what to do for each other.

People last until they don't.

When people want attention, they only want someone to listen to them talk.

Everyone cries out for you, but who listens to your cry?

When people go through a rough patch in life, you're always the one to talk to.

People always want you to listen to their problems, but when it's their turn to listen to you, you're ignored. ALONE.

You always feel even around the people who possibly care about you the most, your family and friends judging you on how you act, look, talk.

Just ignoring people isn't going to help anyone, it makes them believe that they're bothering you when they try to speak with you ALONE.

You're antisocial.

No friends, no family, or so you think, a family that will stick up for you, but no, always fancy your sibling over you -

you'll always be in the shadows alone with other forgotten middle child or forgotten family members

They ignore you.

Alone but overwhelmed because of all of the overthinking that you do.

Are you still there? You feel like a body of nothingness waiting to be recognize alive on the outside, dead on the inside,

losing all of the compassion I keep holding on to any joy you have left.

Alone, you still feel no one loves, cares, or thinks about you.

But ALONE, you will stay ?

Student Name: Bella Nguyen  
Grade: 8  
School: Kleb Intermediate School  
Title: Con xin lá»—i vÃ con yÃªu NhÃ BÃ Minh  
Category: Personal Essay & Memoir  
Key: Silver Key  
Educator: eric cloning

I have wronged them, the people who took care of us for all of our lives. It's been a year and I ask for your forgiveness. Forgive me for not calling. Forgive me for not telling you a genuine goodbye. Forgive me for not apologizing for what I have made you endure for 12 years. When I see you again I will bow down and ask for your forgiveness. After all that time I still have yet to call. I want to call but I can't bring myself to face you for I am a coward. I need to face you. Tell you that I miss you. Tell you that I want to see you smile. Tell you that I am sorry for not telling you that I love you.

I remember a vivid image of being a rude brat to Bà and I yelled in your face multiple times. I never apologized and now that you have fallen you can't recognize me anymore. If I got to see you again I would never be like that ever again. I remember any time we visited you before we moved away, every time I looked you in the eyes I would get a lump in my throat and my heart would feel heavy and I would want to leave before my bandage would rip off of the broken glass. I should have loved you harder and I promise I will always and forever. Ba, I'm sorry.

Ông, why can't I hear your angelic voice anymore? I miss the soothing voice that I would get to hear when I greeted you as you lay on the couch. I want to hear your serious voice when we pray before my parents pick me up. I remember when I would see you and I got to see your loving, calm face I would feel peace. Seeing you play Chinese chess with Cô Mai every evening would always be so intense but deep down that was how you spent time together. But I would never spare any time to spend with you, I always took you for granted. Ông, I'm sorry. I never loved you enough. If I could have another chance to spend every minute of my life with you I wouldn't spare a second not being by your side.

Chú Cường, he always makes me laugh and smile even in my bad times. I remember laying on the couch downstairs watching a movie and you would always come over and ask what I'm watching and I'd reply in a rude and annoyed tone. I would always look at you and give you a displeased look but now that I think back, I can see the pain in your

eyes regarding my unmannerly attitude. Yet you enjoyed cheering me up and taking frowns away from my face. I wish I appreciated you more and showed you that I cared, I won't ever be derisive towards you again and give you happiness and take away your despair. Chú Cường, I'm sorry.

Speaking of making funny and humorous gestures was Chú Tuấn. You always had such a sweet and gleeful smile, however, me and my siblings constantly push you away, yell at you, and be insolent and irritated with you. As you noticed how bothersome you were your face would fill up with guilt, hidden with a small grin. You would slowly walk away and disappear amid the house. Chú Tuấn, I'm sorry. If I could take away the anguished look plastered on your face I would and I would be more mindful with the words I use towards you.

Although Chú Hưng wasn't around much, when he was he was funny and always made me laugh and make jokes with me and my siblings. However, my older sister did not like your jokes and thought they were absurd and took them personally. He didn't seem to care but he still liked to have fun conversations with us. Now, I miss those discussions and I wish I had seemed to care a little bit more and cherish those conversations. On the day we were leaving, I didn't get to tell you goodbye. I didn't get to give you a goodbye hug. I didn't get to tell you I'd miss you and remember you. Chú Hưng, I'm sorry. I should have written you a letter telling you how much I hoped we could see each other again and how much I still care and miss you.

I may not have been able to understand what Cô Mai said but you were courageous. You weren't hesitant when it came to being bold and feisty. You would always try to trick us into getting into trouble or you would ask us to help you download apps on your iPad since you thought it was our specialty. I miss the times when you always calmed me down and hugged me out of my anger and sadness. I remember how you would always come and hang out with me and sometimes like to get me sweets and desserts. I wish I had appreciated you more and told you how grateful I am to have you. Cô Mai, I'm sorry. When I get to see you again I will help you fix your iPad or buy you one and do everything in my power to see you happy.

Now, there is Cô Thảo, I would always spend time with you and you were like a second mother to me. I remember when I got in an argument with my siblings and I was sobbing and you would always come to my rescue and I ended up in the warmth of your arms as you wiped away my tears. You treated me as if I was your own and you kept my secrets when I would come to you like I was a riled-up volcano. There was a point where I wanted

you to be my mother because of one small impact you had made in my life, sewing. You taught me how to fix up something that was taken apart or ripped away. Cô Thảo, I'm sorry. I should have held onto you longer and tighter and never let you go. I will tell you I love you.

It's been a year. I haven't called, I didn't call. I want to call and I need to call before it's too late. But when the sun disappears upon the horizon and the moon makes its way I weep. I weep knowing that I have treated them badly, that I didn't apologize, that I didn't call, how sad and lonely they must be, or how finding out that they're gone without sending them a proper goodbye may be. I know someday I will stand up. I will put my fear aside and call. I will come back one day. When I see you again I'd kneel and apologize and wish for your forgiveness. I will hold onto you and never leave you. Tell you I miss you. Tell you I am sorry. Tell you I love you.

Student Name: Elle Voisin  
Grade: 12  
School: Klein High School  
Title: Dawn; Dusk; Horizon  
Category: Poetry  
Key: Silver Key  
Educator:

Who told us we would be okay and why did they lie. We are not supposed to grieve so deeply so young. But aren't we just? We feel love deeper than we can understand and there is inherent grief in that.

I need to start over. Pick my bones out of my skin and fish out the marrow, fish out the virus of living, scrape out the infection of shame from my innermost parts.

Deconstruct my skeleton and seam-rip my skin, hang it out with the rugs to be beaten clean, beaten enough that it can pass as new for the next foot that passes over it. It's only decor, after all.

My body is decor and death is the looming moving truck.

(I can't make a metaphor without explaining myself.)

I don't want to die.

Maybe if I clean enough bones, clean them gently

And attach them with care.

Maybe then I can clean my own. Maybe then I can brush off the grave dust and tighten my joints back into position.

I want you to feel like I love you.

I want to ask how to do that, but to ask is to admit failure

I'm guessing, instead.

I can't see my words. I couldn't see your face. I could feel you

Prodding my heart and patching my throat with your gentle hands,  
From thirty seconds away

The sun is going down, and you are asleep.

There is only history books to catch the heart that plops so pathetically out of my throat  
and bleeds out of my ears.

I imagine I am the mountains, all the way at the horizon.

I catch the sun in my belly when it dips and burn every inch of my body in loving him.

The sun rises, a new day starts.

My throat is charred and raw from letting him go.

The sun has to rise. A new day must start.

Student Name: Emery Harrison  
Grade: 8  
School: Krimmel Intermediate School  
Title: Death;  
Category: Personal Essay & Memoir  
Key: Silver Key  
Educator: Lisa Liessmann

The thought of death was an early one for me. For me, the thought of death is the burning, piercing, consoling embrace of my father. The course of my life and the entirety of my identity changed with one noun: death. The words that paved the course of my new existence consisted of loss, agony, demise, and stagnant mental mutilation. Grief has five stages: denial, anger, bargaining, depression, and acceptance. The remainder of my life was changed by one event, causing these words to be as memorable to me as my own name. Death was my way of life; it was my alarm, solitude, and melatonin. The reminiscence of what could've been, where he would've been, and what should've happened instead of how it had. Significant events in my upbringing ripped away from me as though I was unworthy of normalcy.

While searching for relief from the burden crushing the remainder of my soul, I found that enough physical pain could mute emotional suffering. Hiding within myself to escape the crushing fear of opening my eyes to the reality in front of me felt as comforting as the slight tickle that comes with agonizing pain. Though it gave me consolation in the moment, this coping mechanism eventually welcomed me into the darkness in which I am still drowning.

We were on the way home from an abruptly ceased shopping trip, the car completely silent, when my mother began bawling. This woman of steel began to unravel before me, revealing the longevity of pain that was to come. In the middle of the highway, I was told my dad was in the hospital; a stroke had set fire to his brain and that he was in surgery now. If he makes it, he may not be like he used to be. He was found lying on the floor, possibly for a few hours, but the timeframe was unknown as he was home alone.

As fast as the tide, the feelings came and receded; I began drowning in a sea of dissociation. As an emotional child, the inexpressive sigh that flowed out of my mouth was irregular. I was a rock floating on top of calm water. My father was in a coma for 13 days following this traumatic conversation, and I've been searching for an expected feeling since.

The facade of my placidity lasted me into the panging stab of a night preceded by the worst day I'd ever have. Nightmares like a flaming torch in the prolonged darkness of the night, the rambling cluster of thoughts in my head like a sock lost in the dryer. The drilling

sound of the voiceless screaming from inside me sustained me in the tenderness of my weeping. To be tortured by the consciousness of every minuscule thought was as though I was sleeping on a bed of bees.

Sitting straight up, I was abruptly woken by the calm comfort of my mother's voice. "Get up, babe. We need to go say goodbye to Dad." Her voice was small and feeble, like the wisp of a butterfly, yet carrying the weight of a circus elephant. As we left the house, it seemed I had also left my innocence and the child-like version of myself there upon my mattress to rot.

At that moment, I understood that time was a construct. Seconds felt like minutes, minutes felt like hours, and days passed without my knowledge.

Separated from the only parent that now remained on this earth, feeling more alone than ever, I entered the cold barren hallway of the ICU. My voice diminished with every blink of restrained tears. I found myself standing blank-faced in the hospital room with my stepmother, my grandmother, and the limp framework that was once my able-bodied, goofy father. Tubes and machinery kept him alive.

The body was a stranger to me, and I could not explain the feeling that surged through my veins. I knew his daughter, his birthday, his mother's name, the scent of his cologne, how his voice sounded, and how his hand held mine. Now I know his death date, how his mom began to snivel in the corner of the cold damp room, the smell of the hospital filling my sinus cavity, how the heart monitor sounded while piercing my ears, and the final seize of his hand before I left him forever. This corpse no longer encased the man I once knew so well. It was empty. Though he was there, he was already gone.

The metaphorical rock that had found itself lodged in my throat so tight that I could barely breathe left me voiceless as I was supposed to say my final goodbyes. Walking away from the last place I would ever see him, I felt a piece of me fall behind with every step as if I melted onto the hospital floor.

The deafening boom of the ICU doors crashed closed behind me as my face fell a sickening shade of green and white. I walked into the waiting room, fainting into the arms of my mother, who was patiently waiting for the ghost of who her daughter was just moments prior. My mom and the shadow of her newly damaged daughter stumbled toward the parking garage, passing other humans as if we had not just lost someone so important and vital in growing up. In the deafening silence of the diminishing child psyche, I disconnected. Disconnected from the world that my father no longer resided, from the car his daughter sat sniffing, from the body of the hurt and helpless child who wanted answers, from the head that seemed to now be more against me than the entirety of the world. As I had done time and time again since his stroke, I disconnected. From that point forward, I promised myself not to publicly display my emotions any longer. This plan had always worked. I found great consolation in dissociation, yet still, something inside me hunted for a way out.

The funeral was like a thousand ants had crawled into my eyes, bit my insides, and brought parts of me back to their colony. I felt like a bug under a magnifying glass. Everyone watching and waiting for a specific response that I was not displaying appropriately. People with eyes on me, watching from every corner of a very crowded room, all speaking to me as if they mattered at all at that moment. The friends of my dad, friends of his mom, family, his best friends, their kids. All inspecting the darkest new addition of my soul, one traumatic event that doomed me for all eternity.

I sit on the stiff wooden church bench in the corner by the door, fiddling with my skirt as a thousand eyes burn away my skin. It was almost as though my skin began to rot alongside his. Like father, like daughter. His soul had departed as I sat clawing at mine, trying to keep it inside of me. My skin itched and burned, though, at the same time, I felt completely unaltered. My mother's hands were on my shoulder, weeping as silently as she could behind me, as she tried to not let me see her undeniable sorrow.

Not one tear flowed from my eye that day. Nor could I manage even one at the burial. I did not experience a single tear for months. I had found a way to completely disconnect myself from reality until too much time had passed, and I began to have issues coping with the lie I had fed myself for so long.

To express the internal pain I suffered I dug it out with a plethora of sharp instruments. Making art of my pain, I expelled it with strokes of silver. Beads of blood that seemed to stream as though a river of serenity protruded from the drawings marked upon my arms. I dipped my brush into white, but it returned red. With every dash of the instrument, the excruciating trail of crimson flooded and washed away the once clean slate of an innocent child.

My body was like the ocean, only so much explored. The more I suffered, the deeper I ventured into the dark depths of my split skin. And then it would just turn off like a flipped switch. Every loud, screaming, thunderous feeling washed away just as quickly as it drowned me moments before. Sniffling in my silence, the dark feelings of regret immediately flushed my body's pain. Just as quickly as I bled, I cried, swearing I'd never again do that to my body. The feeling of burden encompassed me, knowing I needed help but did not want to feel as if I was a liability. I did not want to feel as if I was once again the child being stared at by its sorrowful watchers in the back pew of the funeral of her father. Like an injured puppy who needed saving. How would I end a self-inflicted pain that I could not seem to resist?

Since the lowest points of my life, I've found answers to that question. Healing comes in many ways; some days it's therapy, others it's crying, and sometimes it's the gentle voice of my girlfriend. I've since learned about dissociation and that I had been doing that all along. Accepting that he can wait for me as I take my time living every moment to its fullest, as I know he would want. I was ready to give him my heart in place of the one he

had that now halted its beat eternally. I harness his absence now to keep mine going. Showing his love to those who hadn't gotten to meet him.

For better or for worse, he will continue to live through me. He was the kind of person who jumped out of planes, raced on his Harley, and still made time for gently loving his daughter. I still hear his voice when I do something reckless or his absolutely God-awful singing when The Beatles come on. Now releasing their final song, I relish in the memories I shared with my dad as we sang down the highway, resulting in many smiles.

In the 33 years he lived, the most valuable lesson he taught me was through his death. No matter what you go through, your impact will live past you. My dad's father killed himself, completely destroying him for years. Even with that horrible burden placed upon him, my dad was still a goofy, joy-filled, vivacious man. He wasn't perfect, but his life was almost poetic. He turned his sadness into art, expressing his hardships by making everybody else chuckle. Just as he had lived the entirety of his life, his passing was just as abrupt and scary.

I've found comfort in a semicolon. A punctuation known for a sentence that could've ended, but the author decided to continue on instead. My life seemed as though it were meant to end, and instead continued on. Though there were times I begged for death to finally claim my soul, I'm glad I was denied this pleasure. I was merely taught to enjoy the moments you have with somebody; you never know what experience could be the last you share. I've been alive for 13 years, 2 of which without him. No amount of time will ever remove his soul from my body. He embodies me and urges me to keep going as he couldn't. His life was cut short, and I will not let mine be. At the mere age of 13, I've gone through more than most adults have, and I still found the light at the end of the tunnel without it being the end. Learning to harness tough emotions and turn them into lessons has been a great challenge, but just as my dad would say, he's proud of me. I will forever be his daughter and will continue to live my life as such.

Life is short, time is relative, and your presence is necessary.

Student Name: Elena Yeppez  
Grade: 10  
School: Klein Oak High School  
Title: Deer In Headlights  
Category: Short Story  
Key: Silver Key  
Educator: Lauren Bibeault

### Pursuit

The hospital was dim. All hospitals are at night, she supposed, but Wyn felt like there was something different about this one. It was cliché, she knew that. But the way that the lights buzzed overhead, loudly, grating on her ears, felt like a warning. A loud, big red flag almost screaming at her to leave. The whole place seemed sinister. The feeling made Wyn sick, made her dizzy, nauseous with anxiety. Her unease was like a festering wound, oozing, about to burst. She didn't know how to alleviate it, even the slightest. She had fallen asleep in the chair in the hospital waiting room, and woken with drool all down her face and her baby hairs matted to the sides of it. She had only come here because the little old hospital was the closest thing in the middle of nowhere. She and Jayden had gotten into a wreck driving back home. A deer had jumped out (well, at least that's what they silently decided had happened) and they hadn't had enough time to swerve or stop. The car hit it with a thud and a series of cracks. The bones of the deer had been breaking then. They only registered it after. Wyn, who had been fighting sleep in the passenger seat, had screamed bloody murder as the whole thing happened. It hit the front bumper, then the windshield, and went flying off to the side onto the lane next to them.

It lay dead in the stifling darkness. There had been blood on the grill of the car, pieces of flesh tangled in it. They didn't even know how that was possible. The little bugs that got stuck inside of it were coated in blood, and it almost made Wyn throw up thinking about it. The windshield was cracked and the left mirror had been struck by the deer's body, so it was pointed at an awkward angle. They both swore to the other that the deer had jumped out and that they couldn't have done anything about it. But she knew that secretly they both had reservations about not just where the deer had been, but what it had been doing. Wyn didn't tell Jayden, but when she'd been sliding in and out of slumber, she'd raised her head for no particular reason to look at the road, and she had seen it.

She had seen the deer standing, really standing, on its hind legs in the road. Directly in their path. It had been staring dead straight ahead with its hoofs resting like dead weight at its side. She could have warned Jayden then. She had tried to really, but she couldn't tear her eyes away from the deer and its soulless stare, glazed over and reflecting almost

metallically in the headlights of the car. There wasn't an ounce of kindness in its eyes, and logically, Wyn knew that was because an animal can't really be kind or mean. But this was different. Most animals have a sort of light in them, an innocence, a sense of purity. Like a newborn, just blank and unknowing but still sinless. It is not difficult to recognize. This creature's eyes though, had been devoid of such a thing. It had chilled Wyn to the bone.

When the deer had hit the car or the car had hit the deer (either seemed an appropriate description honestly), Jayden's head had smacked on the steering wheel. And for a moment he went completely limp, as the airbags puffed out. And it had been just Wyn and blood and the deer and the darkness. She tasted the metallic tang of blood in her mouth, from her lip, now busted open and bleeding down her chin. She didn't move an inch then, besides crying softly until Jayden had woken up. Once he had, they had mumbled something to the other one about whether they were okay or not and inspected the car and each other. Jayden had been bleeding pretty badly above his eyebrow, and it looked like he needed some stitches. So after they surveyed the car and the dead carcass of the deer, Wyn had driven to the hospital. It wasn't a far drive, it was maybe fifteen or so minutes away. The hospital was old, and in just about the thickest part of the woods. This, Wyn thought, was a huge design flaw. They could have chosen anywhere else to put the hospital. Strategically, it made no sense to put it out here in the middle of nowhere. But at least it was there. The glowing neon lettering of the hospital sign was flickering, and every letter or so was dark. It looked unclean and unattended. But with blank smiles and open arms, the small hospital staff admitted them into their care. Wyn refused any help because she was always acutely aware of (and terrified of) the possibility of medical malpractice and the danger of strangers. Old habits died hard, she guessed. She had been like that since she saw a documentary on botched medical procedures. From then on, she had always done her best to not get sick or hurt. Now in the dim waiting room, she stretched and yawned, her bones cracking and creaking, a sound that reminded her of the damaged deer they'd left on the road. Its eyes flashed in her head and her breath hitched. No one seemed to be around in the immediate vicinity, but Wyn still felt watched. Maybe she hadn't shaken the deers' eyes from earlier yet, and her leftover paranoia was seeping into the new situation. Her gut had never been wrong before though.

She proceeded to explore intuitively, looking for maybe a vending machine for snacks or some water. The hospital was plain and old, not much about it had been modernized. There were dusty paintings of fruit or flowers hung in the hallways, all slightly off-kilter. The floors were checkered dirty off-white and maroon with scuffs everywhere. Wyn peeked into empty rooms and around corners but found no one, save from plastic skeletons in some of the rooms. She found a long hallway, that seemed to stretch the length of the hospital while decreasing on a steep incline. Overhead, the blue-green fluorescent lights buzzed louder. The electricity must be wired weirdly here, she thought. Wyn, for no reason, suddenly very badly wanted to get to the end of the hall. She felt something pulling her towards it, tugging her soul like a fish on a line. So she began down the hallway. Behind her, lights began to pop, but she didn't notice. Her pace was steady

but began to falter as she heard a noise. In the now dark, she heard something hitting the linoleum tile. It almost sounded like the light trot of a hoofed animal. She froze. Suddenly, all she could hear was the blood in her ears, her heart pumping, and the hoofs. She didn't want to look back. She didn't want to see it, even if she had this horrible, rising suspicion she knew just what it was. But as if controlled, her head slowly swiveled (though she fought it) in terror towards it. She felt tears welling up in her eyes. Her head stuck in place and her knees gave out as she made eye contact with the same soulless metallic eyes she'd left lying in a pool of blood on the road.

Wyn meant to scream. In front of her, it rose again to its hind legs, wobbling as it did so. There were shards of glass in its muzzle, and huge gashes across its body. You could see part of its rib cage. Dark red, almost black blood had begun to coagulate from its wounds, leaving it a disgusting bloody clotted mess that was half dried, half dripping onto the floor. It left a puddle around it. Its fur was knotted and greasy and its front limbs were limp at its sides once again. The same stance it had been in before they'd hit it. Its hind leg lifted to walk and Wyn lept to her feet and spun on her heel right there and began to run. She ran, faster than she'd ever run before, towards what felt like no exit. She didn't quite know what was going on, but she knew that whatever that thing really was, was coming for her. Lights exploded and went out at a rapid pace behind her. She could hear the hooves gaining on her as she began to run out of light, clopping, nearly sprinting towards her. Closing in. She could even hear its ragged, feral breathing. She wondered how it had the luxury to exhaust so much air and so much energy. It was supposed to be dead. She could hardly breathe, her fear was clogging up her lungs. She knew soon, she was going to run out of stamina, out of light, out of ideas. She knew the deer would not. Frantically, her eyes scanned the hallway for as far as they could see. She noticed there was a door to her left, coming up in about ten, fifteen feet. She waited until the last second to slip into it. She heard the deer skid and crash into the wall.

Her lungs loosened slightly, she was safe. For a minute maybe, but she was safe. She knew her sense of security was false and that her situation was worsening every second she spent standing around, but Wyn ignored it. She was good at ignoring things. The room she was in was dark, and she was terrified to turn the light on. She fumbled for a switch and felt something hanging overhead. A chain. She tugged on it and the lights flickered on. Now in the light, she saw it was a small room, full of boxes and dust. She looked for another door, another exit. An attic even would do her good. She went through the boxers to see if there was anything of any sort of use. Some cooking oil, some matches, some canned beans. Nothing of any great importance. In the corner, next to a metal shelf stacked with cardboard boxes, she noticed a small window that was just about ground floor level. How odd, she thought, that she was already underground. She hadn't noticed as she was running. The window had a tarnished silver latch on it, and from the looks of it, it seemed easy enough to operate. Oh, thank god she thought. Thank god. Of course, though, it was just out of her reach. She shook as she walked, keeping her back pressed against anything stable as she slid over to the window and its latch and its

freedom. With haste, she began stacking boxes to give herself a boost. She was just going to unlatch the clasp when the door burst open and cardboard, food, oil and packing peanuts went everywhere. The deer burst in screeching. Wyn screamed back at it, reflexively, and fell into the metal racks. Its rusted ragged edges cut into her back and arms. It tore at the fabric of her shirt and her exposed skin, leaving uneven scratches across her. She looked around for something to help. She saw the cooking oil and remembered the lighter she always kept in her pocket. She grabbed a can of baked beans and threw it at the deer, then shoved past it. She had caught it by surprise with her fleeting moment of bravery. It staggered after her. Unscrewing the lid, she threw the oil at the creature, and the viscous liquid sloshed over it, making it appear more grotesque than before. The blood fought the oil's existence, refusing to swirl and mix with it entirely. It roared at her, angrier than it had been. She ran back up the hallway and turned the corner into a patient's room. Into Jayden's room, where he lay turned to his side. Her lungs were on fire, her palms were sweaty, and she could barely think. Instinctively, she had gone there. She hadn't meant to. She didn't want to bring this horror to Jayden, but she had and there was no taking that back. She had only maybe a couple minutes or less before the thing arrived. She started towards his bed to wake him when she noticed something was off. The bed sheets were ruffled, and stained. Abnormally so. She peeled back the now almost black hospital covers and screamed.

Jayden's nearly severed head lay in the bed, with his mouth agape and his eyes rolled back. His neck was torn to shreds by an assortment of sharp objects, assembled in haphazard rows. Antlers. There was a singular hoof print on his face, that had been indented so perfectly, with so much force, it had broken his nose and split open the top of his lip. Wyn howled in anguish. Her best friend since high school, was dead in a hospital bed by some glorified miniature moose. She sobbed, holding the edge of the bed, covered in blood. Her hands were slick with it now. She stroked Jayden's lifeless face.

"No, no." She sobbed. "This is bullshit, this isn't fair, what is going ON!" she screamed. She wished she had never come here. She wished she'd said something. She wished he hadn't been driving. She wished she'd fought to go with him and had never fallen asleep. She wished she wished she wished. She could hear the deer and its hooves down the corridor. Everything was closing in, everything was crashing in on her and she didn't know what to do. As she wiped the blood on her jeans she felt the lighter in her pocket then. She knew what she had to do. She covered Jayden's face and pushed his bed to the side, before unlatching the door and stepping out. The deer crashed into her and knocked her back onto the floor, like a bowling pin. Her head slammed into the hard, cold, hospital ground. Its jaw unhinged and snapped at her with seemingly millions of rows of teeth, and she could feel its hot rancid breath on her face. Blood and spittle fell on her as it screeched. She fumbled for her keys in her back pocket and stabbed it in the eye. It faltered, wailing in agony and she slipped out from under it.

She flicked back her Zippo lighter Jayden had gotten her for her 18th birthday, along with his favorite brand of cigarettes. She hadn't been able to even finish one. Her guess was he thought it would be a good opportunity for them to bond together or something, but evidently, it wasn't. She had kept the lighter in her front pocket since then, in case he forgot his. It ended up serving him more than her, but she had never cared. Good lord, she was going to miss him. The deer was still thrashing around on the ground and it gave Wyn enough time to open her lighter and throw it on the beast's back. It erupted into flames, its thick fur coat catching immediately. It wailed and fell. Wyn sank to the ground with the thing, her tears flowing freely. She wanted to evaporate then and there. As she sobbed, her fear dissipated. Still crying, she wiped her bloody keys on her shirt and rose. It was over for her finally. Her head hurt, with a pulsing headache that made her want to hollow out her brain. Scoop it out like cantaloupe in a spoon. She limped to the front desk, stood at the door, and clicked her keys. The broken car feebly chirped back at her. She sighed in relief. It was over.

Then she heard a hiss and felt a wetness on her head. The hiss was the sound of a hundred synchronized sprinklers going off. Her blood ran cold.

From the hallway, she heard a feeble clop. Then more, steadier this time. She turned, in pure horror, to see the deer standing, still on its hind legs, steaming, charred, bloody, and wet. Most horrifically, alive. She could smell the odor of its burnt fur and hear it sizzle in the downpour. She dropped her keys as her mouth opened in horror, a final scream. Its head tilted to the side as its eyes padlocked her gaze to it. Around them, the lights began to pop once more.

She was the deer in headlights now.

Student Name: Addison Smith

Grade: 12

School: Klein Cain High School

Title: Echo

Category: Poetry

Key: Silver Key

Educator:

From tinged eyes fall rose-petal tears  
as girls depart their teenage years  
with minds embittered by life's turn.

Donning ribbon wings, they take flight  
seeking in earnest, pure sunlight  
from boys who will neglect their burns

Lies once held in gold fingertips  
fall as black thread sews shut pink lips  
as young angels trade words for love.

Dancers turned puppets cut their strings  
unaware their live hearts still cling  
to safety old dolls once dreamed of.

Oh, how beliefs from ancient books  
drew lines we foolishly mistook  
to be remade when time adjusts.

We know our place, our own limits,

sacred lakes men can't inhabit,  
because nymphs were sirens once.

But at our core, we are just girls:  
bright-eyed and sweet, wanting the world,  
dreading that "alone" is the way.

Searching for that false redemption  
through Narcissus's deception.  
But for that foolishness, we'll pay

like Echo.

Student Name: Inaya Maknojia  
Grade: 10  
School: Klein Oak High School  
Title: Essence of Hope  
Category: Poetry  
Key: Silver Key  
Educator:

Through the joys of life  
And the sadness felt by millions  
From the revolving of the sphere  
To the wars of successions

To the disease killing thousands upon thousands  
To poverty,  
Migration.  
Destruction  
And to natural disasters

A thought emerges...

Stopping all motion  
Not a single breath released  
Suffocating the captive  
Holding on tightly and not letting go  
Despair  
Impassive  
Torture  
Anguish

Waiting...

God, waiting

For a trickle of something

For something to course through veins

For it to ignite the soul

For wanting to feel anything

Waiting

For a rope that will pull torment out of this dullness

Encompass all in light

and give a chance

A chance to live again

Waiting on the empty darkness to swallow everything whole

Into a tide of nothingness

Let it swirl deeper into the abyss of the tunnel of blackness

Watching the life drain

Screams of

Pain

Sorrow

Fear

Suffering

Watching as the long trail of vitality make its course down entirety

Watching as all fall, breaking on impact

Shattering everything to the ground

Leaving nothing

But remains

Millions of sharp glass just waiting to hurt

Gasping for air

Knowing that this is it

The final straw

The last stretch

And then it happens

From the depths of darkness

Forms a small miracle

Coursing its way through clouded thoughts

A small miracle

Fighting

Failing

Pushing harder

Reaching

God reaching

To hit the nerve

To allow for a bulb to light

To allow for the prisoner of its mind

To feel

The small miracle erupting into millions  
Making its way around the hostage  
And creating a blanket of protection  
Igniting every cell & forming thousands of crystals  
To come to the realization

That it is here...

Hope

There it is  
Having finally shown its face  
It urges to walk ahead  
Leave everything behind & continue on

Move forward

See what the future has to bring  
See what life has to offer  
Because it's not up just yet

Where can you go  
What can you experience  
What can you do

Millions of thoughts connected

Through a small sign

A small idea that paved its way to the forefront

Proving again and again

Its immense power

To alter the course of life

Student Name: Gavin Newton  
Grade: 12  
School: Klein Cain High School  
Title: To Think is to Feel is to Be Human  
Category: Portfolio Category(Writing)  
Key: Silver Key  
Educator: Gavin Newton

Redefined.

My whole life, people have called me stubborn. Downright spiteful, even. Parents and peers alike would parrot passive-aggressive assessments of my personality, and these demeaning challenges against me were met with equal opposition regardless of their origin. Authority felt designed to be my personal foe, assistance taught to me as a crutch I should never need. As a kid, I wouldn't have agreed with these labels. As a kid, I was wrong.

People write about individual tragedy or heroes. They write expositions and climaxes, penning lives that seem almost story-like. Above all, they write about how they were good and infallible, telling of moments where they seem perfect. I didn't have any of that, not for a long time. What I had was a series of mistakes and failings that no one, yet everyone, was responsible for; what I had was nothing short of a disaster on a canvas, plastered in full colour for all to see. It was only because of my stubbornness that I even survived, and that isn't hyperbole or exaggeration. I clawed my way through the daily beatings in foster care, having to make a new life in 10 different school districts, fighting for scraps in homeless shelters, and through hell itself while shouldering burdens that were far from being mine. I've been reckless all my life, making choices that some would call stupid and others, brave. Whether or not something would hurt didn't matter to me because help was always the gift I could give far more than I would ever take. I survived because I was stubborn, and that was enough for me. That only started to change when I met a good man for the first time in fourteen years, the only man who I respect enough to truly call one. It was when I looked in that warped mirror found in the sprawling maze of time called parenthood, that I saw what I could be.

See, while I was stubborn, my dad was tenacious. He'd had it worse than me at every single turn in life, so much so that he wasn't there for any of mine. Yet, here he was now. Trying. Having the audacity to try his way through life anyways regardless of how pointless it seemed, and not surviving but thriving because of it. When I saw him that first day, I knew I loved him despite any absence. I loved him because in barely a moment of seeing him standing across from me, a familiar grit seated in his gaze but nervous energy

in his hands, something clicked. I recognized him as someone who I knew I could always depend on, someone who understood, and as someone who I wanted to be. Loving and knowing him for the next four years quenched the raw, double-edged sword of my stubborn nature, forging it into something I knew I could use for far more than just the bare minimum of survival.

So here I am, applying for colleges and competitions that might not accept me the first time or the second, and still trying anyway because that's the path I've elected to take. I'm doing the same thing that I've always done, fighting tooth and nail for a purpose, just with the context redefined. Instead of fighting to survive, I'm fighting for a life in which I can thrive. They called me stubborn when I was young but, for the longest time, I wasn't. I was just a kid falling head over heels without thought like a tumbleweed dancing aimlessly across the deserted landscape called life. Yet, to all those watching my struggles that felt some incorrigible need to comment, I was stubborn. Always stubborn. That's the funny thing about labels; they stick, and they change.

Student Name: Luke Bartkowiak

Grade: 11

School: Klein Cain High School

Title: The Hourglass

Category: Poetry

Key: Silver Key

Educator: Luke Bartkowiak

The Hourglass

-

Time

begins

all things.

It knows how rivers have coursed

Through the growth of the most grand forests.

It has known all, and its sands have run beyond all,

for The Hourglass has built the most regal of mountains,

made creatures evolve into conquerors of ages new and old,

Prompted the world turn until its inhabitants outgrew such a limited space

And looked to the skies for a new life away from home, away from time's constraints.

But

As readily as it creates and nurtures the new, Time is also the designer of destruction for the old,

The ultimate undoer of its creation's uncertain necessities and penultimate fantasies.

It must consume all, such that in the very end, beyond our own expiration,

Beyond man's almost impressive, but ultimately minuscule conquest,

Beyond all that is or was or will ever be, at the center of all,

The Hourglass might forever run down the

vast sands of time until

nothing remains

but itself,

Time.

Student Name: Akhila Veettil  
Grade: 9  
School: Klein Cain High School  
Title: For My Dead Grandpa  
Category: Poetry  
Key: Silver Key  
Educator:

It's a full moon tonight  
And though it shines brightly  
It darkens your casket in the front yard  
Why is it in the front yard?  
I get it, the backyard is ugly  
And you worked so hard to create this beautiful garden  
It makes sense you're with it  
But it doesn't make sense that you're not here  
If you were, everything would be perfect  
There would be a full moon in the sky  
I would show you my new braces-less smile and you'd love it  
Then you would sit in your "claimed" chair and eat dinner with us  
And you would make fun of how I rip up my food to go perfectly with my side dish  
After I would put in your eyedrops for you  
You'd watch the news then get ready for bed  
And when it's bed time you'd say the silly prayer you always do  
Kuttu and I would out our spin on it  
You'd laugh, we'd laugh  
Then we'd go to sleep.  
And though there is a full moon in the sky,  
The rest of my perfect dream is just a dream.

A year  
It's almost been a year since you've died  
And I'm still not over it or used to it  
Everyone else moved on so fast  
They haven't even teared up being in your house without you in it  
But I have  
Your huge picture in the glass cabinet scares me a little  
It doesn't look like the you I know  
The you that's always making jokes and laughing  
God, do you know how long it's been since I've heard you laugh?  
I'm forgetting how it sounds  
Your smell  
Your beautiful eyes  
Even your voice I'm forgetting  
And I wish you would just come back to remind me of everything about you  
But you can't  
Because you're dead  
And you have been for almost a year.

I see you everywhere  
A skinny, fair colored man  
A buttoned up shirt  
Black pants  
Glasses  
Grey hair  
On a motorcycle sometimes  
And though it looks like you  
It's not you

Not the same smile or laugh or eyes

Not my grandpa.

I will:

Climb the tallest trees,

Jump from the clouds,

Fly a rocket,

Shoot myself out of a cannon,

And build wings

To try to reach you in heaven

But I still haven't reached you

I think we're playing hide and seek

Because I've looked everywhere for you

You must have found a really good spot

Because I've been looking for almost a year

And it's been the longest year of my life

I call to you but you don't respond

I try to text you but the messages turned green

You're not even in your house

So where did you go?

I'm begging you to come out now

Because I'm getting tired of this game

I'm getting tired of missing you.

Student Name: Eve Ventura  
Grade: 11  
School: Klein High School  
Title: Fragile Love  
Category: Poetry  
Key: Silver Key  
Educator: Dawn Sharpeta-Black

"Glass isn't as strong as you think"

"Be careful with it"

She warned him,  
he held it timidly,  
being so careful,  
worried the slightest touch would shatter it.  
He wouldn't dream of breaking it.

"Be careful with it"

She warned him,  
he held it so casually,  
being so careless,  
tossing it around with no plan.  
He would never intentionally break it.

"Be careful with it"

She warned him,  
he held it no more,  
pieces littered the floor.  
He never meant to break it.

"I was careful with it"

He pleaded,

she clutched onto the large fragments,

desperately trying to piece it together.

He to fix it with apologies and regret.

"Be careful with it"

She wept,

he held the pieces together,

attempting to make it whole again.

He bled to fix his mistake.

"Be careful with it"

She pleaded,

he let them slip,

trying to hard to make her happy in his pain.

He stayed to help fix her shattered heart.

"I told you,"

"Glass isn't as strong as you think"

Student Name: Sophia Celis  
Grade: 10  
School: Klein Oak High School  
Title: Godzilla  
Category: Poetry  
Key: Silver Key  
Educator: Anthony Jackson

### Godzilla

I see all the other kids with theirs  
Having the greatest time ever  
"I got to bake cookies with her!"  
"I got to go camping with mine!"  
That's all I ever wished for at eight years old  
Was to have what they had with theirs,  
but I couldn't

Reminding me I was given a different one  
One that isn't seen in movies  
"Was she always like that?"  
"No honey, she wasn't"  
She never hit me with her hands,  
but slapped me with her words  
Calling me names I'm too scared to repeat  
"Why is she so mean?" I thought  
All I ever wanted was for her to be like the others

### Nurturing

Kind

Loving,  
but those traits were absent  
"You don't love me," she said  
And she's right  
I don't  
I can't

Because no one would do that to a kid, or their child  
No one would do that to someone they love  
No one would talk about their bloodline like she does  
Saying things that make me want to scream

Godzilla is her code name  
People laugh when I call her that,  
but that's what she reminds me of  
I know it's wrong  
Believe me I know, and I try to change the way I see her  
It's been seven years though

And if you were to ask me how she was before  
I couldn't tell you  
"You only have to respect her, not like or love her."  
That felt so wrong  
I've had good times with her of course  
When she's in a good mood,  
but it all gets drowned out  
From all the memories I have  
Where she made me miserable

Locking myself in the bathroom so she couldn't hear me sob  
Gaslighting me to think I was wrong  
I was her target  
I still am her target

Anything she says or does makes me tick  
"She does a lot for you."  
Even though it's true  
It can't balance the scale  
Of evil and innocent  
Love and hate  
I don't cry easily  
Emotionless she calls me,  
but from all the times she's screamed at me  
How couldn't I be?

If you were to ask what I'd do  
If she were to ever leave  
I'd simply tell you  
"I'm not sure if I could cry at her funeral."  
But when I look back at the 2,555 days of all of the agony,  
She is more of a blessing in disguise  
Demonstrating what I didn't want to be  
Accepting her I couldn't do  
At least not yet,  
but hopefully in a different life  
We could be what I dreamed of as a little girl

Student Name: Brooklynn Clements

Grade: 7

School: Hofius Intermediate School

Title: Going to the Olympics

Category: Short Story

Key: Silver Key

Educator: Lauren Brennan

Let's go, let's go! We are going to be late. Don't worry we don't have to leave for another two hours. I know, but by the time we start to load everything up we will be late. Okay, okay we can go. Has anyone ever told you that you are very impatient? Well, actually yes they have but haters are going to hate. When we left I stood at the door and thought I am going to watch swimming at the Olympics. Then as I was daydreaming about it I heard let's go let's go, we are going to be late! Wow I said, well played. As we got in the car and drove to the airport I just kept saying is this a dream, this has to be a dream on repeat? I couldn't stop. Finally, we made it to the airport! As we were walking through the airport and heading to our gate I just kept thinking it's getting closer and closer to Olympic time. Then they came over the announcements, it was time to board. Indianapolis, here we come!

As soon as we landed, I tried to get off the plane as soon as I could. Not only because I was so excited but some kid sitting close to us had gotten sick and there was no way I was catching anything this week. After we got our luggage we headed to the condo we rented and I anxiously awaited tomorrow where we will see the best of the best. As soon as we walked in I ran over and turned the tv to the sports channel hoping they would be talking about the upcoming swimming, and they were! They were showing the very stands that I would be sitting in and cheering from tomorrow. Later on we went out to eat and ordered what felt like everything because we were so hungry. It might have been the best meal I had ever had or I was just so hungry and excited anything would have tasted good. As we were leaving we saw a lot of buses headed towards the natatorium where we would be tomorrow. I was wondering what all the traffic was about but then I realized it was the swimmers. I said let's follow them, so we did. When we pulled up they stopped us and said only coaches or swimmers can enter tonight. My first thought was oh man I don't know if I can be this close to it all and not get in. My dad said oh but we are coaches for Team USA and we are just going to head in and make sure things are good to go, have a good evening. Then dad tried to go but the guard said hold on there just a second. Man, we got busted I thought. The guard said I know you guys aren't coaches but good try. Mom said I didn't think we could fool you but this girl has been waiting her whole life for this and she couldn't wait any longer. The guard paused for a minute and looked around

and handed us a pass and said well we can't let her wait any longer can we? Oh my gosh he was letting us in, I couldn't believe it. As we drove towards the parking lot he told us to have a good time and I thought oh we will.

As we walked into the pool we walked up to the stands that I had just seen on tv and I couldn't believe it as I looked around. The swimmers were practicing and it was so fun to watch all these swimmers that I follow and couldn't wait to see them race. We watched for a little bit but then mom and dad said we better not over use our gift from the guard so we headed out and headed to our condo. As we walked out I thought we will see you tomorrow and couldn't wait. When we got back to the condo we were trying to get ready for bed and I said there is no way I could go to sleep now I was too excited. Mom said the sooner you go to bed the sooner it will be time to get up and go back.

When I woke up I realized that today was the day I had been dreaming about, I was going to the Olympics! I always wondered what it would be like to say that and it felt amazing. Just like at the house headed to the airport I just kept saying let's go let's go! We couldn't get in the car fast enough. It felt like forever to get through the traffic but it was actually only a few minutes. As we pulled into the natatorium parking lot again the same guard was there. He saw us and said how are my Team USA coaches doing this morning with a laugh. He looked at me and said are you ready, it's finally time. You guys go in and enjoy every minute.

Walking up and sitting in the stands to watch the swimmers warm up definitely felt different today. There was so much excitement and you could just feel the energy. Luckily they said we could take pictures because I was taking a million and taking it all in and could only imagine what they were thinking down there. Did they have any idea that just watching them do what they do better than anybody else was the most exciting thing I could imagine and wanted to be in their shoes more than anything else. All the work, sweat and time they put into being on the biggest stage was worth it. I knew right then I was going to do everything I could to get there.

Indianapolis had come and gone and it was eight years later and we were now at the latest Olympics. As I looked around thinking I can't believe I'm here again but this time it was different, I was standing behind the blocks looking up in the stands waving to my family cheering me on. Now knowing what those swimmers were thinking all those years ago, dreams really do come true.

Student Name: Anya Rodricks  
Grade: 12  
School: Klein Cain High School  
Title: Just Another Night  
Category: Science Fiction & Fantasy  
Key: Silver Key  
Educator:

“Girls, come down for dinner.”

Two groans simultaneously emit as thuds are heard from upstairs. One girl dashes into the bathroom, while the other lethargically walks down the stairs. In the corner of the hallway, a camera swivels to follow her movement as she heads to the dining room. As soon as she is out of its sight, it repositions itself to face the top of the stairs, waiting until a slam is heard.

The lights brighten as she enters the dining room, as if anticipating her presence. She sits down at the table and stares aimlessly at the wall as she awaits her food. As if on cue, her mother hurriedly enters the room with a steaming bowl, placing it right in front of her.

“Wait till your sister comes down before you start eating.”

She groans once more, but obeys obediently. A few minutes pass and she feels impatient. No longer wanting to wait, she picks up her spoon and takes a scoop out of the bowl. Instinctively she drops the spoon before she can take a bite and it falls to the ground. She pushes her chair back, scraping the floor noisily and picks it up. As she places it back on the table, she notices her mom staring at her in disdain in the hallway between the kitchen and dining room, holding another steaming bowl. Looking down, she sees her bowl steaming, but empty. She looks up again at her mom as she stays in her position, the only visible movement being the steam coming from the empty bowls.

Confused, she sits back down. Her mom returns to the kitchen with the bowl and leaves her alone once more in the room. She hears the slam of a door from upstairs and thuds as she assumes it is her sister coming downstairs to join them. Eyeing the doorway, she expects her sister to pop in, but does not see her. Minutes later, no one. She once again pushes her chair back and walks to the doorway, peeking out. No one. Scanning the hallway in case her sister is trying to scare her, she detects no presence hiding.

As if driven by a random urge, she walks out of the room and goes up the stairs. Half expecting someone to be behind her, she turns around to just see an empty stairwell. The camera, as if wanting to announce its presence, aims directly at her, flashing a small green light. She ignores it and walks towards the bathroom, its door fully shut. She knocks. No answer. She knocks once more. No answer.

She reaches for the handle and turns it slowly, anticipating a jumpscare. The bathroom is empty. She walks, looking around for any sign of someone in there, but detects none. She walks back out and spots a room with an open door. She goes toward it and walks in, flicking on the light. The light illuminates the room, displaying the pink walls, frilly sheets, and girlish decor around the room. She looks down and notices her attire, a pink flouncy dress with white frills. Showing no signs of recognition, she turns off the light and exits the room to only bump into someone. Taking a step back, she sees her mom in front of her.

"I said come down for dinner."

"Coming."

She waits till her mom goes downstairs before lethargically following her. As she reaches the dining room, a slam resonates through the house. She sits down at the table and awaits her food. A steaming bowl is placed in front of her.

"Wait till your sister comes down before you start eating."

She looks up and sees no one. She rubs her eyes and then her mom appears, staring expectantly at her. She groans, but then obeys like a good daughter.

Suddenly a loud beep is heard through the house.

"Phase 1 complete, onto Phase 2."

Her mom suddenly slumps onto the floor. The walls begin turning white. The furniture begins to disappear. And her vision goes dark.

"Phase 2 commencing. Initiate communication."

Student Name: natalia casadiego  
Grade: 7  
School: Hofius Intermediate School  
Title: Killer  
Category: Short Story  
Key: Silver Key  
Educator: Lauren Brennan

Im tired. Just tired. Not tired of doing something but tired of life. Not like i wanna die or anything but it would be nice to have a change all i do is work study sleep and repeat. I just want something more chill but I like being a lawyer, the most trusted lawyer in boston.

I think i threw something, maybe a chair, i'm kinda wasted so I can't really tell or remember anything. I do know that someone walked into the balcony a couple of minutes ago. She is standing on the edge of the balcony. Seeing her there is kinda stressful, it brings back a lot of memories and not the good kind. I walk up to her to tell her to get down because i don't not want to feel guilty over someone else's death.

She's beautiful. I don't usually think of girls like that. "What's your name?" I asked her to start a conversation. "Marcella" she answers, what a perfect name, Marcella. "Will you please get down from there," I say confidently "Marcella." "I'm comfortable here thank you." she answers with a sorta sassy tone. "Get down from there Marcella." I demand. She finally gets down and I see her stunning curly dark hair and honey brown eyes. She's even more gorgeous than I thought.

We started talking and it was like there was some kind of connection in between us. Like we've known each other for years and we can just talk without feeling judged. "Why did you throw that chair?" she asked. She saw me, she saw my anger, she saw a side of me I do not want anyone to see or know about. "Nothing just thinking of what happened." i say "what happened?" she says with eagerness to know in her voice. I don't know why I did it but I did tell her about my past. But I didn't exactly tell her it was me. "This little boy killed his brother. I know it sounds crazy but they were playing with the gun they're dad owned and he shot his brother. And he has to live with that forever." "that's gonna ruin him, having to know that is gonna affect him so bad." she said with a worried look on her face. "what do you do for a living?" she asked "i'm a lawyer." i say. This is the first time I've ever

been proud of my job. "What about you, Marcella?" I said back, I love her name, it's so perfect just like her.

"I just graduated college. I wanna be a chef." she said with so much passion. I love that. We kept talking all night and every little thing she said made me like her more and more. I don't know if I was just that tired or if I actually did like her. "What's your deepest darkest secret?" she asked "that I think you're fine and attractive, and I would like to take you on a date." I said without thinking. After I said that she got so red and I realized what was said. "really?" she asked "what's yours?" I say avoiding her question. "well, I want a relationship." she says not looking at my eyes "I'm not that kind of guy, I'm more of one date and then no contact after that." I say. After that we just talked and then went our separate ways. I'm never gonna see her again and I'll probably forget about her. It doesn't really matter.

It has been 6 months since the night I met Marcella and I never told her my name, I think she forgot about me. I've been thinking about her non stop since that night and I thought I would never see her again. I've never been this crazy over a girl before.

One day I got a call from my twin sister, Nicole, telling me that I have to drive to her job because her boss got burnt really badly and she didn't know what to do. Why would she call me tho? I'm a lawyer not a doctor. I was so confused since when did she have a job, her husband is crazy rich like disgustingly rich. So I rushed to the location she sent me. When I get there it's a restaurant but it's not open yet. Once I found Nicole I looked for the first aid kit and asked her what happened, and she told me that her boss was making some meals to see what she was gonna put in her menu and she got burned trying to pour something. I asked her where her boss is and what's her name? "She's sitting over here, her name's Marcella" she said. When I heard her name I froze, but I wasn't trying to get excited because maybe it wasn't her.

I walk through kitchen doors and I see her laying on the ground in pain. I ran to her as fast as I could, I started reading the stuff while my sister got the car ready to go to the hospital, I mean I didn't know what to do. I rushed her to the hospital. Thank God there was one 5 minutes away. A couple of minutes went by and they said that she was fine but she can't cook or be near heat for a week to prevent the burn getting worse and that the burn was just her right arm.

I don't know if she forgot me or not because she hasn't said anything but when she saw me her eyes lit up. I hope that it means that she remembers me and that she's happy to

see me. I haven't forgotten about her at all, I had hoped I would see her again and here she is. We leave the hospital and I'm finally alone with her and that's when the idea to ask her if she remembered me came up "So, remember that one night at the balcony?" i say "of course i do, i thought you forgot." she said. I laughed but i wanted to tell her that it was impossible to forget her, that she impacted my life and i don't usually get this attached to girls, specially when i just talked to them once.

I dropped her off at her apartment and I had the biggest smile on my face. Not just because I saw her, but because she remembered me. I want to go back and see her again but I can't or else I'll look desperate. i want to check up on her a couple days after maybe about 3 days after the incident. "does your arm hurt?" I ask, i'm trying to keep my cool and not act all worried or else she's gonna notice that i like her or something. I feel like a little boy in middle school that has a crush but doesn't want her to know. I like that feeling but at the same time i dont i want to show her how much I like her and that it's driving me nuts."im fine , it doesn't really hurt anymore." she said "if you want me to leave i can leave i just wanted to check up on you" i said "NO!" she demanded "no don't leave, it's so lonely in this apartment" i couldn't help it anymore so i told her straight up "omg i have to tell you something and i'm probably gonna sound ridiculous but i don't care, since the night i haven't stopped thinking about you and it driving me crazy i have a case in two days and i can't even focus on that."

After I told her she told me that she didn't forget about me and that she wished to see me again and that when I walked into the kitchen she was so happy but that she thought I wasn't into relationships and that she thought I wouldn't take her seriously. My whole mindset changed when I saw her and when I started talking with her I realized how much I actually really liked her . We started dating after 3 weeks of talking every single day for hours and hours non stop.

" Cheers to the new restaurant, somewhere new to eat finally." I said. All of the important people were here: my family, marcellas family, our friends, etc. She was so happy and so was I seeing her like that. Around 9:30 maybe later everyone left so we started heading home too. I like staying at her apartment since she doesn't have any roommates like me, we usually watch movies and cuddle or play bored games. I thought it would be a great idea to make a dessert since it's her special day.

"Are you ok?" I ask. She's sitting on the couch on her phone but her face isn't happy like it was earlier. "yea im fine, just thinking." she answered "thinking about what?" i ask

"you, how it's crazy that i met you one random night at a balcony and now your one of the most important people in my life." she said "Yea, if you would've told me that i was gonna be your boyfriend 9 months ago i would've told you that's crazy." i respond "Trey? What is that smell?" she says with a worried face "omg the cake!" I realized while i'm running to get the cake out of the oven "Trey be careful you need a glove!" she yells while i take the cake out of the oven with bare hands "OW!" I yelled so loud. My hands were on fire. I ran as fast as I could to put them under water to cool off. And she started laughing and giggling, it was kinda funny now that i think about it but i didn't think it was funny at that moment. I was angry and in pain. She leaned in to help me while she was giggling, i was so angry so pushed her. I didn't mean to be rude or ruff with her and then she fell and hit her forehead against the cabinet making a huge scar.

"TREY!" she yelled while tears started coming down her cheeks

" I'm sorry, i didn't mean to push that hard, i'm so sorry." I immediately said on my knees trying to help her. I messed up and I know that so I helped clean up and then I went home. Whenever I want to say bye she wouldn't even look me in the eyes or even hug me or talk to me. I messed up real bad, but what could I do now? Beg? I don't think that would be a good idea i'll just come back tomorrow

Are you ok? -Trey

No, it hurts. I can't put anything on it. - Marcella

I'm sorry.-Trey

No, you shouldn't have done that. -Marcella

I look just like my dad. I'm acting just like him when he would hit my mom. I don't want to be like that. I went to the flower shop and picked up a beautiful bouquet of red roses, marcellas favorite flowers and i got her some chocolates with a teddy bear. I was hoping this would be enough for her to forgive me. Not like materialistic things can fix what I did but I don't know what can. I knew she didn't want to talk to me so I left them on her front door and texted her to check.

Hey, check your front door - Trey

Why?- Marcella

Just check it please.-Trey

fine - Marcella

...

omg , did you?- Marcella

Yes, i'm sorry for yesterday, not saying that flowers and a teddy bear can fix what i did but it's the least i can do, im sorry -Trey

Omg, come over now- Marcella

i get to her apartment and as soon as she opens the door she jumps in my arms and starts kissing me, and then i don't know why but i said something that in the 4 months of dating neither of us had said."I love you." i say it went dead silent. She stopped kissing and she looked at my eyes and started blushing and smiling."i love you too." she said "i've been wanting to say that for a while now."Yea me too but i didn't say that i just kept quiet.

A couple of months went by since that day and we had not argued as bad as that day until I found her phone. I picked up her phone to check her time and in the back of her phone case there was a phone number and as soon as i dialed that number on marcellas phone the contact name came up, Travis, i was furious. Another guy? Who's this other guy because last time I met her whole family there was no Travis.

I was furious and threw her phone and sat on the couch waiting for her to get out of the shower so I could ask her who this so-called Travis was. We started arguing and I hit her again. This time I slapped her so hard that her face started growing red and you could see the handprint on her face. She opened her mouth and she was spitting out blood. I didn't stop there because of how mad I was. I pushed her and I pushed her so hard that she fell. And her neck hit the counter. And then her body touched the floor. It went silent. What had I done?

She was dead. I fell on my knees over her body. Her heartbeat was gone and her breathing was cut out. I wanted to rush her to the hospital but I couldn't or else they would arrest me. My life had changed for the worst in 15 minutes. That's all it took to end her life and ruin mine. I felt grief at that moment. And I knew it was gonna be a feeling I would get everyday for the rest of my miserable life. I would have to live with grief and not just grief but also guilt of her death.

No one found out I killed her, it's been 25 years since the incident. I don't know if I'm a bad person for killing, and going to her funeral, and acting like it wasn't me. I miss her. I killed the love of my life. And now I have to learn to live without her.

Student Name: Kathryn Hunt  
Grade: 8  
School: Krimmel Intermediate School  
Title: Maturity Avenue  
Category: Poetry  
Key: Silver Key  
Educator: Lisa Liessmann

The blue-haired girl shakes at the memory,  
of making more memories.  
She's getting older with still more years to come for her.  
With no driver's license, she can't navigate through  
Maturity Avenue.

If only she was a cat of nine lives.  
Then her mistakes wouldn't follow her.  
Like a shadow stays behind its owner.  
But it's fate to move on.  
Though she never found it interesting.

The blue-haired girl wants a memory.  
But not of becoming older.  
Just of her in princess dresses and her mother's heels,  
and the garage opening to her father coming home  
from Maturity Avenue.

If only she could have a new shell,  
for hers had been cracked too many times.  
Like thin ice, trapping her forever underneath it.

But it takes a hammer to beat through.

Though she never had the courage or strength to do so.

The blue-haired girl was a memory

ever since she cut it all off

She's gotten older with fewer years to come.

She wants to make the most of it, so she spends her time on

Maturity Avenue.

The blue-haired wants to be smart

but not a show-off.

She wants to be kind

but not a goody-two-shoes.

She wants to be funny

but not the class clown

The standards are high, but she raised them higher for herself.

Because being above average isn't enough,

she hurt herself inside and out, and the people she knew didn't realize.

Now with her immaturity cut off like her blue hair,

she can suffer in silence while being "happy" on

Maturity Avenue

Student Name: Addison Smith  
Grade: 12  
School: Klein Cain High School  
Title: Missing Letters  
Category: Poetry  
Key: Silver Key  
Educator:

(Verse 1)

Red pills under blue light;  
purple makes me queasy.  
Hope you had a great night;  
last time you saw Jesus.

The mirror's covered in lipstick.  
You swore you heard new lyrics.  
The words written are nonsense,  
I had begged you just to sing it.

(Pre-chorus)

Waste all of your intellect,  
getting to a high.  
Light cigarette packets,  
put smoke signals in the sky.

(Chorus)

I wish you knew that ivory lines won't fix you.  
I hope you stop picking up booze with tissues.  
I miss the girl with bright blue eyes that I knew.

I can't keep spending weeknights fighting for you.

(Verse 2)

They told you back in high school  
cannabis would help you write better.  
I found you out of your mind  
crying over missing letters.

You sedate all your demons  
giving up all your song fodder;  
self-medicate to reason,  
sending a soldier to a slaughter

(Pre-chorus)

Waste all of your intellect,  
getting to a high.  
Light cigarette packets,  
put smoke signals in the sky.

(Chorus)

I wish you knew that ivory lines won't fix you.  
I hope you stop picking up booze with tissues.  
I miss the girl with bright blue eyes that I knew.  
I can't keep spending weeknights fighting for you.

(Bridge)

Lose your mind and miss your time; let minutes slip you by.  
Develop a dependency and fall down with the highs.

I know you'll fight with broken skin, your body torn and bruised,  
but trying to find a breakthrough in a breakdown will break you.

(Chorus)

I wish you knew that ivory lines won't fix you.

I hope you stop picking up booze with tissues.

I miss the girl with bright blue eyes that I knew.

I can't keep spending weeknights fighting for you.

Student Name: Joshua Rivera

Grade: 9

School: Klein High School

Title: one more day .

Category: Poetry

Key: Silver Key

Educator: Valeria Hero

one more day

just give me one more day

give me power

for one more day

give me the will

for one more day

give me the strength

for one more day

one more day

just give me one more day

one more day and then the next

one more day I rise and rest

and dream of one more day again

one more day I walk this earth

one more day to find my worth

but I know not where to search

one more day

just give me one more day

one more day you might not have

one more day you might not give

one more day is all I need

one more day is all I seek

one more day is all I've sought

one more day is what I'm taught

one more day is what I'm told

one more day

just give me one more day

one more day to say goodbye

one more day before I fly

to see her grinning through her cry

one more day before I go

one more day is all I know

to fix all my regrets and woes

one more day

just give me one more day

all I need is one more day

to say the things I've never said

who'd ran around inside my head

who'd entered once and never left  
who I could not get off my chest

every thought and every word  
never known and never heard

every dream and every choice  
manifested by my voice

one last day  
one last chance  
one last song  
one last dance

one last day  
one last hour  
one last minute  
one last second

one more blink  
one more breath  
one more beep

and then one beep that never ends  
every family member and friend  
every loved one, love they send

all my struggle know one knows

bring the curtains to a close

Student Name: Lexi Shults  
Grade: 11  
School: Klein Oak High School  
Title: Progress  
Category: Personal Essay & Memoir  
Key: Silver Key  
Educator: Lauren Bibeault

It has been a few months since they put you in the ground, yet each day still blurs by as if time itself has slowed and I am stuck in an endless loop. I couldn't bring myself to visit you for the first two weeks. It felt like if I came to see you the truth would settle over my shoulders like a wet blanket on a cold night. Even in the lack of feeling I hadn't been able to take in a breath since you had taken your last. It wasn't fair though, to leave you lonely as the snow began to fall. Winter was your least favorite season, after all you hated the cold. So I went to the supermarket first. They had plenty of beautiful flowers in every color. I got you a bouquet of twigs, it felt more you than any vibrant flower there. Plus it wouldn't deteriorate by nightfall. The cashier had given me a strange look, but I simply diverted my gaze as I thanked her and left. I didn't make it there the first day. Unspoken words filled my mind and unshed tears burned my eyes, and I pulled onto the shoulder of the long country road to stare at the street ahead for hours. The streetlights blinked overhead as darkness swept the sky, and it was only a couple hours after the sun had left that I turned my car towards home. I kept the twigs on my bedside table that night, hardly sleeping as the clock ticked beside my head. It was impossible not to think of you, how much you had despised that clock when it disrupted your sleep or your studying. The sun rose the next morning as I pulled out of my driveway. I made it to the cemetery gate that day, and the frozen metal stung my skin as I gripped the bar that separated me from you. I didn't know which stone you were, and if a stranger walked past they might wonder if the flush of my cheeks was of cold or of grief. It was both. That day too, I walked away. On day three I never even got out of bed. I laid there on my side all day and stared at the twigs, trying to picture you holding them. You would have dismantled the bouquet, picked out the two straightest ones and given me the shorter one, trying to claim that the shorter person gets the shorter wand, though we both know I was at least three inches taller. We would have spent the whole day trying to practice magic, and as the sun fell you would have fallen asleep on my shoulder, a peaceful smile painted across your face. That was all I needed for my day to be truly magical. The fourth day hit me like a truck. I stood among rows of snow covered stones, the only body in a place of souls. I called out to yours, begging to be led to where you rest. Maybe you were right about God, about joining him, for no matter how long I bargained I never even heard a whisper in the breeze. Does that mean you're with him? I began to shiver and my feet went numb as the cold seeped through my socks. I clutched the twigs in my hand as I dragged my aching toes back to

the warmth of my car. Your mom called me that night, invited me over for dinner the next night. I've always loved your mom, she was warm while my house was normally overtaken by a dull chill. I remember when you first introduced me to her, I remember thinking that you had her eyes. She still lays your place at the table, and now more than ever she makes chicken parm, your favorite. For a while, we were both silent as we ate her delicious meal, that night it was tomato soup. Eventually, she broke the silence, looking over to your place with a smile on her face and telling me that she appreciated my company. I smiled back, save the tears, and we began to talk, about my schoolwork, about her job; she had gone back to work the day before, and about new movies coming out. We planned to go see the new Marvel movie together, and neither of us mentioned that you had been thrilled when it was announced. She told me later that night where you were, six rows back and four stones in. I think I should've known that, I mean I was at the funeral. Truth be told, I don't remember much of that day, other than fixing your hair. You never like it to be tucked behind your ears. On the fifth day I found you. I wiped away the snow from the letters on your grave. I hadn't cried until that moment, seeing your name like that, so permanent. For weeks I had thought that I must be a monster because I couldn't cry for you. I placed the twigs over you, letting my hand linger over the patch of dirt that I had dusted snow away from. Never in our many years had I wanted to feel you more than I did in that moment. One last hug from you, one last handshake, God, I would even be happy if you punched me in the arm. But nothing changed, not even the slightest breeze on that snowy day. We ate warm chicken parm that night, your mom and I, and she held me as hot tears rolled down my face as the emptiness of your chair punched a hole in my heart. I think she knew it was coming. I hadn't called her before I showed up, but she was still waiting for me by the door. That was a few months ago. It's spring now, and the air has returned to my lungs in gasping, shallow breaths. It's warm in the sun today, but the breeze stings my cheeks as I stare at your grave. I'm wearing my blue hoodie, the one you always asked me for on days like this. You never brought your own jacket, though I always reminded you before you left the house. One time you'd told me that mine was comfier. I'd always brought a spare for myself after that, so that you could wear this one. Wildflowers are growing all around the cemetery, mostly yellow and gold. On your grave, the twigs I left you have vanished, replaced by a singular flower, a small one with pink petals. It hasn't flourished yet, its petals curled around its hidden center, but the color peaks through the middle of the bulb. I pull it from the grass and crush it in my fist. Pink was always your least favorite color, I don't think you would have wanted that flower there. Of course it didn't deserve to die anymore than you did. You and that flower are one and the same now, beautiful things torn from the earth before you were given the chance to bloom. I open my hand and watch as the broken flower floats away in the breeze. Other days the wind had the help of my damp cheeks to make me shiver. Now I have no more tears for you, the hole in my heart has grown too big, it takes from me my ability to cry. Put simply, there's nothing there anymore. I sat silently with you today. It felt strange, we never had a silent moment when we were together, there was far too much to be sad. But now there is nothing I could say to bring you back, so why say anything at all?

Perhaps I should tell you that every day I wish I could go back in time, replace you with myself, or do more to prevent your last few foggy breaths from fading into the air as though they had never existed at all. Or maybe I'm supposed to tell you about the people we never liked at school, how they're pity-nice to me now that you're gone. Or maybe I'm supposed to tell you that you would have loved the movie you had been so excited for. The words that will never leave my mouth however, be it to you or anyone else, are that I believe between you and I, you're the lucky one. For it has been a few months since they put you in the ground, yet there may be many more until I'm down there with you.

Student Name: Juliana Ye  
Grade: 8  
School: Doerre Intermediate School  
Title: Sand Castles  
Category: Flash Fiction  
Key: Silver Key  
Educator: Melissa Reisdorf

My denim-covered bottom sinks into the warm beach about a centimeter deep. Heels grazing against the chalky sand, I hold my scrawny knees close to me. The summery breeze presses its balmy lips against my cheek. My fingers drag against the base of my modest sand tower, like an engrossed sculptor. I am a diligent novice of my craft. As a mother does her child, I caress the castle's side. The solemn waves threaten to send my amateur castle to the ground, but they have been merciful.

The sombre, unquiet ocean has lapped at the sandy bottoms of my feet a million times, the spray evanescing away. I ache to stretch my sore legs and frolic off, like a penned up horse dreaming of wild lands. However, I dare not abort my crude sand castle and leave it to the ocean's surging waters.

I look about me, stealing glances of the works nearby. Lavish castles with grand moats of briny seawater, and creamy, big shells dug into their walls. Sloppy, pitiful piles of soggy sand that could give way at the slightest touch. Clearly, there is a broad difference of quality between these various castles.

Yet, it doesn't matter. Eventually, the sudden, inevitable crash of spume and saline will send each and every castle collapsing, forced back down to the wet bottoms to return to its drowning origins. The result is inexorable for all. The apathetic ocean blindly seizes our creations and is certainly not set on returning them. She is not picky. No matter how grand the edifice or sorry the heap of damp grit, she will eventually steal it forever more.

Continuing to build with a new constant dread of destruction, I abstractedly gaze back into the cerulean billows of the ravenous sea. The ripples undulate, disturbed by the force of the untamed winds. Her pacific waves reached for me, sinking her claws into the sand and dragging it home.

But upon squinting into her depths, there is a mute silhouette of an infamous killer. An austere Reaper, waiting for me below.

Student Name: Elizabeth vazquez  
Grade: 12  
School: Klein Forest High School  
Title: Swimming Tragedy  
Category: Personal Essay & Memoir  
Key: Silver Key  
Educator: Angela Willingham

One eventful full day, me and my family were getting ready for an upcoming party that my dad was invited to. This event happened a long time ago so I can't recall specific details that morning, granted I was only 6. I seriously doubt a child was thinking of memorable philosophical ideas but I'm certain my brother was since he was two years older than me. One of the things I do remember was seeing the big house and being mesmerized. My first thought was thinking they must have been rich. They had pillars at their front entrance, 4 cars, two garages, a nice garden front, etc., two stories. Granted looking back on the event now they weren't exactly "rich" but rather well off but to my young mind this house was a mansion. The party also was extravagant having a lot of snack tables and party games with the house neatly decorated with party favors. From appearances alone, anyone would think the party was a kid's birthday party but the host was my father's manager who was throwing a family-friendly party since most of his employees and he had young children. Throughout the party, I spent most of my time in the living room with other girls around my age. We had fun coloring, building bracelets, and party games, however, that is where I finally saw it.

I wasn't paying much attention to my surroundings, however, I eventually caught on. From the clear glass on the sliding doors I saw the big backyard pool. When I saw that pool all I wanted to do was go in for a swim. I immediately bolted to my parents and begged them to let me go in. And like clockwork other girls from my group wanted to go in as well. The majority of the kids came prepared with bodysuits, extra pairs of clothing, towels, sunscreen etc. But alas I had no idea nor did my own parents so I myself did not come prepared so that was a motivator to not allow me to go in the pool. But there was an even bigger reason to not let me go in the pool, such as not knowing how to swim.

That alone made my dad, who was a very strict and overprotective parent, not let me in the pool. But I was a very persistent child that wouldn't let words 'no' stop me. I was begging and pleading to let me have fun with the other kids since by now they were getting ready for the pool. My older brother soon enough joined me with my pleading. Eventually other parents soon got caught wind of the situation and even stepped in

telling my father that I would be alright and they would even lend them some bathing suits for me and my brother. My own mother was less strict compared to my father, and she finally gave in not being able to bear her children's pleas. In other words along with me, my brother, a set of other parents, and my mother were pestering my father to give in. So in a once in a lifetime moment my father gave in.

I was very ecstatic, so soon me and my brother were in the pool. It was fun at first but it didn't take long to soon become bored to be condemned in the 3ft deep section. After all, most of the other kids were playing in the much deeper section in the pool. However there was one significant friend I made. She was more sympathetic to my situation and encouraged me to learn how to swim. He explained to me that if I just pushed myself and kicked repeatedly with my legs then I would know how to swim. So I tried doing that repeatedly in a sense all that I was doing was aggressively doggy paddling in the shallow end of the pool. With stupid kid knowledge I have concluded I taught myself how to swim. . Now for all the time I was in the pool both me and my brother were in the same section with both sets of my parents watching from the side lines. However, eventually my brother got bored and left the pool and at the same time my mother was inside the house for whatever reason. With only my dad watching me, this is where I decided to challenge myself and show off my non-existent swimming skills. I started swimming deeper in the pool, going across the 4ft section successfully given how I was easily able to kick myself back on the surface. Back then, I had no real concept of what swimming was, much less how permanent death was. Once I got the 5ft section I struggled immensely. In my head I repeatedly kept telling myself "I can do it, I can do it". I naively thought if I just pushed myself I would make it to the other side of the pool. Eventually I was too deep in the water, and soon began to silently panic. I don't even recall calling for help either. In a matter of moments the water had managed to swallow me whole. I think these were the first moments I truly became scared, now looking back it was clear my human instinct was telling me my life was in danger. But as a child I didn't know what the consequences were of failing to swim but that fear stuck with me.

Luckily for me, my friend managed to see what was happening and an adult saved me. Now when hearing the perspective from my own family the whole incident happened in less than a minute and a half. I wasn't unconscious but I was very stiff and proceeded to vomit a lot of water. Soon after that my family left, the car ride was very unbearable.

My dad was incredibly angry and soon got into an argument with my mother. He kept repeating "I told you I didn't want them to swim", "She could have died". He never once blamed me but my mother. I felt guilty for causing everyone this amount of pain and stress just for me to go in a stupid pool. But I soon became aware of what the concept of

death was. For most kids, death is terrifying especially when they learn that everyone dies. However I just faced death and the terrifying fear of feeling it.

I asked my older brother multiple questions about death like if I were obsessed with it. "What happens when we die?"; "Where do we go after we die?"; "What happens to your body when we die?"; He responded with the following: "you die"; "Heaven"; "you get buried but you will be dead so it doesn't matter". Him only being 8, didn't exactly give me any satisfying answers but that didn't stop me. In one day, I went from a naive child that had no fear about life, to a child thinking about when would it be the next time they face death and probably won't be so lucky the second time around. But that fear didn't only apply to myself but rather to everyone else I loved, what would I do if someone I knew died. I became traumatized by the idea of it and thought about it nonstop for a few months. Naturally, as the years went on I don't believe I have the same intense fear about death. Naturally I still worry about my own family and friends but for the most part everyone seems perfectly healthy and nor do they put themselves in any real danger on a daily basis.

Student Name: Samuel Mathews  
Grade: 8  
School: Doerre Intermediate School  
Title: The Black Baron  
Category: Science Fiction & Fantasy  
Key: Silver Key  
Educator: Melissa Reisdorf

Azrael was done. After riding for four weeks with no rest, even his limits were approaching. The Blessing of the Angels that had been bestowed upon him by The Great One gave him immeasurable strength, durability, and immunity to the pesky issues of humanity, like hunger. However, his quarter-human ancestry meant he still needed sleep. As he passed through the Grove of Lanka, his carefully trained nose detected a scent that he would know anywhere. There was a Rilayan on his trail. Those ferocious assassins of The Great Foe carried viciously barbed arrows, with hemlock-dipped tips. They were not only incredible archers but also uncommonly talented with both swords and daggers. All in all, they were nuisances that needed to be dealt with. Azrael heard a faint whizzing and saw one of their vicious arrows headed straight from the West towards his face. However, he had already perfected the technique of fighting Rilayans, and the first part of the strategy was to let them think their arrows had made quick work of you. He caught the flying arrow just as it sank into his breastplate, and sent him flying off of his horse. Any other being would have been slain instantly by the poison, and if they survived, the fall, but the Blessing of the Angels prevented poison from affecting his body. His blessing also prevented him from dying to anything other than darkling steel weapons, making a broken neck not that injurious. As Azrael lay there on the forest floor stunned, a second arrow from the East slammed into his horse's thigh, sending the animal fleeing in a haze of pain. Now he was starting to worry, as a lone Rilayan could be dangerous, but two or more could be deadly. Still lying limp on the earth, Azrael inconspicuously drew his blade and prepared himself for the imminent clash. He waited uncomfortably for three torturous minutes before the first Rilayan walked towards his dead body. Azrael tensed for a moment and sprang up in one fluid motion slashing the first Rilayan across the chest with his darkling sword. The tall figure clothed in black garb screamed a horrible death cry before falling to the ground. Azrael turned on the spot just in time to parry the second Rilayan's blade. "In the mood for death I see," said Azrael stabbing and slashing vigorously at the muscular figure. "The only death I will see is the death of a Blessed one," roared his opponent. The two were trading blows furiously, but neither could gain the upper hand. Both were tiring quickly, so Azrael used a brief intermission to drop to the floor and sweep the assassin off of his feet, slamming his deadly blade through the man's stomach. Azrael however, had the strength of will to not kill his opponent, leaving him gravely wounded but still breathing.

"Which one of the demonic Regions are you from?" said Azrael, threatening his opponent at swordpoint. However, the Rilayan was not threatened, responding,

"I am one of the Dark One's personal servants, you overstuffed coward. I live in the Great City of Darkness, Escrolen. I don't understand why, but you have apparently drawn His Majesty's attention to yourself."

Due to the unsubtle insult laced in the Rilayan's words, Azrael pushed his blade deeper, causing a fat drop of shimmering purple blood to hit the floor, and promptly burn through the thick root of the oak the assassin was pressed against. The demon servant hissed in pain, but Azrael took no notice, questioning the enemy even further.

"Why would your stupid, disfigured excuse for a master send one of his powerful servants after one who is not even a full angel? If he sent his assassins after one of the mighty Archangels like Gabriel, that would make sense, but I am just a Blessed One." His dark-clothed aggressor snorted contemptuously and spat in Azrael's face.

"You think my Master sent his most powerful servants to come for you? No, you're not that valuable to him. I'm just the muscle for the messenger that you have just so unceremoniously slain. No, the real assassins are already in your home, trying to get to your so-called Great One. All of your Archangel lords have been forced back, and many Blessed Ones are already lying dead in your land on the clouds."

The dying assassin's words were punctuated by short bursts of purple-flecked saliva, his blood discolored due to his soul having been rearranged to better serve his master. Even in death, the Rilayan was cunning, as he knew no Blessed One could resist their savior complex. Azrael turned around and prepared to teleport himself back into his homeland. The minute he did, however, he realized his mistake. The Rilayan leapt up and with his dying breath sank his sword into the Blessed One's back. Azrael stumbled forward as his enemy whispered hoarsely,

" Never turn your back on an assassin ." As the young Blessed One fell backward slain, his enemy straightened his hunched back and was suddenly consumed by a flame, seemingly from within his own body. The shell of the Demon's servant fell to the ground, a burned husk leaving in its place a shimmering being older than time itself. The Dark One had been freed by the death of his now useless vessel. The scion of evil, the Great Foe was twelve feet tall, with huge horns and deadly claws. His flesh, if you could call it that, was a dark orange and black, the color of magma about to burst forth in an immense eruption of fiery death. He looked upon the body of the fallen Blessed One and spat contemptuously at his face. He turned on his heel, sprouted giant crow wings and took to the skies.

"It's been a long time since I've visited my old home. Maybe I'll take a camera up there and take some photographs before I raze it and burn that whole "paradise" to the ground." The massive demon flew into the air, seeming to disappear from the Earth's

surface as he entered his former home to destroy the peaceful haven that was the home of the Angels.

Student Name: Sophia Celis  
Grade: 10  
School: Klein Oak High School  
Title: The Evolution  
Category: Poetry  
Key: Silver Key  
Educator: Anthony Jackson

"Perfect grades are only allowed in my house"

I was six when I heard this rule

I only knew that my response was supposed to be "yes ma'am,"

But what about my toys?

My stuffed animals, especially Pooh?

My favorite television show that was only on at seven o'clock?

Was all that mattered was a letter or a number every nine weeks?

To a six year old, that life was boring

"Luciana, can you tell me what the answer is?"

Fifty six, I thought

Seven times eight is fifty six

But what if I didn't know that?

Would I be the dumb one in my third grade class?

Would all of my classmates look down upon me?

"Perfect grades are only allowed in my house"

Sure, I was pretty smart

I liked to think I was on top of it all

Not much effort needed

But was that all that people could see?

“This is middle school ladies and gentlemen”

My fifth grade class was nothing like it

Population tripled

Competition in every class you step in

But I’ve always been smart

I’ve always understood an academic concept

But what if I trip?

What if I can’t keep up?

“Perfect grades are only allowed in my house”

What if I crumble apart?

After all, this is middle school

“Congratulations 8th graders, off to high school!”

I couldn't fathom how quick time had gone by

The next four years could make or break me

But I’ll be okay right?

It will be like every other year

Pay attention

Review

Easy A

How hard can it be,

Right?

“Perfect grades are only allowed in my house”

All I’ve ever known is academic praise

The thing that keeps me going

It’s what triggers me to keep writing even if the clock reads 12:24 AM

“But this is high school,” they said

Where colleges are scouting left and right

SAT

AP

ACT

I'm pretty sure Elle Woods didn't need to know

What electron configuration is or how to find slope

It's whatever it takes I guess

But I'm burnt out

Like overused firewood

Nothing left to give

Study,

Sleep,

Repeat

Study,

Sleep ,

Repeat

Study,

Sleep, except I don't even know what that is anymore

My grades dropping like a waterfall

What would the younger me think?

After all, perfect grades are only allowed in her house.

Student Name: Luke Bartkowiak

Grade: 11

School: Klein Cain High School

Title: The Hourglass

Category: Poetry

Key: Silver Key

Educator:

The Hourglass

-

Time

begins

all things.

It knows how rivers have coursed

Through the growth of the most grand forests.

It has known all, and its sands have run beyond all,

for The Hourglass has built the most regal of mountains,

made creatures evolve into conquerors of ages new and old,

Prompted the world turn until its inhabitants outgrew such a limited space

And looked to the skies for a new life away from home, away from time's constraints.

But

As readily as it creates and nurtures the new, Time is also the designer of destruction for the old,

The ultimate undoer of its creation's uncertain necessities and penultimate fantasies.

It must consume all, such that in the very end, beyond our own expiration,

Beyond man's almost impressive, but ultimately minuscule conquest,

Beyond all that is or was or will ever be, at the center of all,

The Hourglass might forever run down the

vast sands of time until

nothing remains

but itself,

Time.

Student Name: Sydnee Blackhurst

Grade: 12

School: Klein Cain High School

Title: The Lighthouse

Category: Dramatic Script

Key: Silver Key

Educator:

[THIS WORK IS AN EXCERPT]

Characters

ELIZABETH Heiress of an old lighthouse

DON Sailor in need of a job

SETTING

Inside a small, cozy light station that is connected to a lighthouse on the central California coast.

TIME

1958, 1959, 1961, 1966, 1967

SCENE 1

(The year 1958. Elizabeth is alone, writing into a notebook. There is a knock on the door. Elizabeth opens it, revealing Don.)

DON

Hello, Miss. Is the lighthouse keeper here?

ELIZABETH

That would be me.

DON

You? Does this place not belong to Elliot Calloway?

ELIZABETH

He isn't here.

DON

Mr. Calloway isn't here? Where is he?

ELIZABETH

He passed away last month. Did you know him? I don't recognize you.

DON

I didn't know him well, but we had exchanged some letters. He was a friend to my father. Wayne Miller?

ELIZABETH

That name does sound familiar.

DON

They fought together in the second war and kept in touch in the years after. My family lives a few hours north of here, so my father visited here a few times to take him out sailing. He died in '47, which might be why you don't know of him.

ELIZABETH

I see. I remember my father telling me about him now.

DON

Elliot was your father? You must be Elizabeth then. He mentioned you in his letters.

ELIZABETH

Yes.

DON

I'm very sorry for your loss.

ELIZABETH

Thank you. Since his passing, I have taken over the lighthouse. Whatever business you had with him, I'm sure I can be of assistance. Please, come in.

(She steps aside, allowing him entry. He steps inside, and she closes the door behind him.)

DON

Thank you.

ELIZABETH

What sort of business did you have with him exactly? Are you a sailor like your father?

DON

Yes! I just sailed in from Peru.

ELIZABETH

You must have quite a ship to have made such a journey.

DON

She's not so impressive. It was honestly a miracle I made it out alive.

ELIZABETH

Where is your ship docked?

DON

The dock half a mile south of here. I could show you the old girl, if you would like. I could even take you for a ride.

ELIZABETH

I don't know. I haven't gone sailing in years.

DON

I promise, it'll be fun.

ELIZABETH

You said your ship isn't very sound.

DON

I am such a skilled sailor, I could take you out on a raft without a splash of water landing on you.

ELIZABETH

So, I won't drown?

DON

The odds are pretty low.

ELIZABETH

(Hesitantly)

Fine, I suppose I'll go.

DON

Then, it would be my honor to take you. The Virginia Ray is a lovely ship, even if she's old. That's her name. Virginia from my mother, Ray from my brother.

ELIZABETH

And yours?

DON

I'm Donald Miller, but please just call me Don.

(He offers a hand to Elizabeth. She shakes it.)

ELIZABETH

Elizabeth Calloway.

DON

(Softly)

Yes, I remember.

(They look at each other, still holding each other's hands. Elizabeth realizes and pulls hers away.)

ELIZABETH

What was it you needed again?

DON

Hm?

ELIZABETH

Your business with my father?

DON

Right! Right. I am in a bit of a pinch for money. Mr. Calloway was going to give me a job.

ELIZABETH

Oh. He never mentioned getting a hired hand. What were you going to do for him?

DON

I was planning on staying for a couple weeks and repainting the lighthouse. Then, I'd just do whatever work he asked of me until I had the money I needed.

(Elizabeth sits.)

ELIZABETH

You're going to repaint the lighthouse? What's wrong with the current paint? I like it as is.

DON

I guess he never got around to talking to you about it. The paint is just old and faded. It could at least use a touch up.

ELIZABETH

(Sadly)

I suppose that is true.

(Don sits next to her.)

DON

If you want, I could do just that. Keep the color and just touch up the more faded bits, or if you really are set on it staying the same, I suppose I don't have to paint it.

ELIZABETH

No, no. It's fine. It's just sort of sad to see memories hidden beneath a layer of paint.

(Sigh)

I suppose that's just how life goes.

(Elizabeth stands and makes for the door.)

ELIZABETH (Continued)

Well, Don, I have nothing to do at the moment, so why don't you lead me to the Virginia Ray?

DON

Oh, but wouldn't you prefer to see her at night?

ELIZABETH

Why on Earth would I prefer that? I'm going to see the thing, aren't I?

DON

The dock is lit, you won't be missing a thing. Besides, nothing compares to sailing at night beneath the stars.

ELIZABETH

Well, you're the expert, I suppose.

DON

That, I am.

(He notices the journal and picks it up.)

DON (Continued)

What's this notebook?

(Elizabeth sits beside him and takes her journal.)

ELIZABETH

It's a journal. I've never really kept one before, but my father always did, and he always appeared content with his life. I'm seeing if any of his little habits were the secret key to eternal happiness.

DON

What are you writing about, if you don't mind me asking?

ELIZABETH

Ghosts. Do you believe in ghosts?

DON

I'm not sure. I've never really thought about it. Do you?

ELIZABETH

I don't know either. My father did. He always said that he would stay in the lighthouse, even after his death. It's nice to think that he's still here.

DON

That's strangely... comforting. People say ghosts are scary, but I suppose you don't see it that way.

ELIZABETH

No, I think they would have a much softer purpose. If my father was right, then spirits remain here when there's something they love that they need to watch over and protect.

DON

That's a lovely philosophy. I hope your father was right. I see he was very important to you.

ELIZABETH

Yes he was... Sorry, there's no reason to discuss such a dreary topic. Will you still be staying here despite the circumstances?

DON

Well, I don't see why not. If you'll have me, I plan to carry out my deal with Mr. Calloway.

ELIZABETH

You are more than welcome to do so. How long will you stay?

DON

Repainting the lighthouse shouldn't take more than a week. Beyond that, it all depends on if you have any jobs for me. If that is the case, then I suppose I'll hang around until I've either run you dry of money or can afford a new ship. I love the Virginia Ray more than anything, but she's old. She was my father's before she was mine. If I ever want to visit Cape Horn again, I'll need a new one.

ELIZABETH

Cape Horn? Where is that?

DON

It's an island just south of South America. It's beautiful.

ELIZABETH

Is that where you came from?

DON

I wish! No, it's quite the journey from Peru. I had hoped to make it down there, but it's dangerous, and I was afraid I would capsize with my ship.

ELIZABETH

Have you been before?

DON

Once as a kid with my father, but that hardly counts. I wasn't the captain, and I mostly just sat around. It's one of the most dangerous passages to sail in the whole world. It's like climbing Mount Everest but with much more water. And you won't die from hypothermia. You'd likely just drown.

ELIZABETH

Then why on Earth would you sail there?

DON

To say that you've done it! Imagine how incredible it would be to say you've done the very thing most are too afraid to try. And not to mention how beautiful it is. There's something so serene about a place very few can reach.

ELIZABETH

But you could die.

DON

I could die at any given moment. If I go out sailing Cape Horn, then at least I'll die happy

ELIZABETH

I see. I would wish you luck, but you seem confident enough.

DON

I know what I want from life. What about you?

ELIZABETH

What about me?

DON

What are you going to do with your life?

ELIZABETH

(Teasingly)

Nothing quite as flashy as sailing to certain death.

DON

(Teasing back)

Well, we can't all be spectacular.

ELIZABETH

I prefer to be alive, thank you very much.

DON

Fair enough. Continue.

ELIZABETH

I want to live simply. Get married, have children. Grow old. I want to keep the lighthouse alive: pass it down to my children and watch as they grow inside it.

DON

That actually sounds really nice.

ELIZABETH

Yeah?

DON

Yeah. Any room for a sailor in that dream of yours?

ELIZABETH

Isn't it a bit soon to ask me such a question? We only met today.

(Don shrugs.)

ELIZABETH

Survive Cape Horn and then we can talk. I won't promise you a place in my life just for you to go off and die at sea.

DON

Then I suppose I'll have to survive.

(End of Scene 1.)

Scene 2

(The year 1959. Elizabeth sits, holding her journal. Don enters from the front door.)

DON

Liza? What are you doing awake? It's late.

ELIZABETH

I've been thinking.

DON

What about?

ELIZABETH

You.

DON

What about me?

ELIZABETH

Don, what are you still doing here?

DON

What do you mean?

ELIZABETH

Last year, you came here and said you would stay for a few weeks, at least until you could afford your new boat. It has been way more than a few weeks, and I'm certain that money isn't the issue.

DON

That's true. I haven't meant to overstay my welcome.

ELIZABETH

You know I don't mean that. You will always be welcome here, but I don't want you to feel like you have to stay for my sake. Sure, I would be lonely without you, but I can handle myself.

DON

I wouldn't doubt that for a second.

ELIZABETH

When you first came here, you said you wanted to sail to Cape Horn, but you have been landlocked for a year. Just know that if you wanted to go, I wouldn't have any hard feelings. I don't want to hold you back. I want you to be happy, even if that means leaving.

DON

Nothing has ever made me happier than being here. It's strange, but I've hardly thought of Cape Horn since I arrived. Even when I did, I never once considered sailing away from here alone.

ELIZABETH

But that has been your dream for your whole life.

DON

It's true that when we met, I told you my dream was Cape Horn, and at the time, it was. But in my time knowing you and looking after the lighthouse, it's changed. Yes, I still want to go there again, but maybe I could bring my child there someday, just like my father did when I was young. That trip was one of the last memories I have of him. I think what I've been chasing after isn't necessarily the thrill of the sea. My dream was a destination, but it became a person.

ELIZABETH

Did it now?

DON

It's strange. I never thought I could love anything or anyone more than the ocean, but I do. I always thought that the worst thing that could happen to me is being unable to sail again, but I don't crave it the way I used to. I don't love the sea any less than I did. It's just that I have something new I love even more. Sorry, my thoughts are kind of a mess. You know what I mean, right?

ELIZABETH

I think so.

DON

Well?

ELIZABETH

Well what?

DON

Do you agree?

ELIZABETH

That your thoughts are a mess? Yes, I do.

DON

Liza, you know what I mean.

ELIZABETH

I want to hear you say it.

DON

I love you more than the sea. Do you feel the same way or not?

ELIZABETH

I do.

DON

So that's why I'm here. Is that a good enough reason for you?

ELIZABETH

I suppose it'll do.

(End of scene 2.)

Scene 3

(The year is 1961. Liza sits inside the light station, writing. Don quietly enters through the front door. He sneaks up behind her and startles her. She jumps, then turns to playfully hit him on the arm.)

ELIZABETH

Don! I just put the baby to sleep!

DON

You didn't hear me come in; I couldn't help myself!

ELIZABETH

You're terrible. You've been gone for three days, and this is how you greet me?

DON

I'm sorry, my love.

ELIZABETH

Welcome home, Don. I missed you.

DON

I missed you too, Liza, but the trip was very successful!

(Sitting beside her)

We caught lots of fish over the weekend, and I have lots of extras back in the car. How would you like salmon for breakfast?

ELIZABETH

That sounds lovely. I can reheat the eggs and potatoes from yesterday.

DON

Have you slept? I know Sue was fussy before I left on Friday.

ELIZABETH

Some. Not much. I tried during her naps. Your mother was a great help. She left just before you arrived.

DON

She did? I would've liked to see her today, but at least I got to before I left.

ELIZABETH

(Teasingly)

Unfortunately, she does have a life outside of taking care of me when you leave me alone with an infant for three days.

DON

The trip was your idea, was it not?

ELIZABETH

That is hardly relevant!

DON

You're not really mad at me.

ELIZABETH

I am!

DON

Are you?

ELIZABETH

(With a pretend sigh)

Well, I suppose you were providing for the family.

DON

If you would prefer, I could just let us be poor.

ELIZABETH

That sounds lovely! You'll never leave again.

DON

But what sort of husband would that make me?

ELIZABETH

A perfect one.

DON

Would you like to starve, my dear? I can go dump the fish I've brought for you back into the ocean if you would like.

ELIZABETH

I would absolutely love that.

DON

Consider it done, then! Forget all about breakfast. And lunch, for that matter. We'll have dinner, but it'll be a salad made from the dandelions that grow outside.

ELIZABETH

You know, those actually have many health benefits. They have all sorts of vitamins. My dad used to make a dandelion salad that was just divine.

(She stands and begins to rifle through a drawer.)

ELIZABETH (Continued)

I might have the recipe around here somewhere if you'd like to give it a try!

DON

Hm, maybe it's for the best that we don't eat them then, since you're set on starving.

ELIZABETH

(Finding her recipe)

Oh, whatever. I've moved on from that idea. Now I want you to help me collect dandelions for my salad. You put the idea in my head, and now I intend to go through with it.

DON

Fine, but let me rest for a bit. I hardly slept on my trip.

ELIZABETH

Don...

DON

Not complaining! I'm sure I got more sleep than you did.

ELIZABETH

That's right.

DON

How were things, though? How's her coughing?

ELIZABETH

So much better. She hardly coughed at all. She hasn't had a bad fit for two weeks.

DON

I'm so glad.

ELIZABETH

(Returning to the couch)

I got so little sleep out of worry, but she was perfectly fine. When she did wake up, it wasn't because of her lungs. She was just restless like a regular child.

DON

Good. I was worried, with the weather changing.

ELIZABETH

She's alright for now.

DON

Things are looking up. Her lungs will only get stronger.

ELIZABETH

I hope you're right... It just feels like we're constantly living on the edge. It's exhausting.

DON

I know.

ELIZABETH

I suppose that's just how it is when you give birth two months premature. I knew it wouldn't be easy, but I'm just so tired.

ELIZABETH (Continued)

(Beginning to cry)

How can I ever have a moment to relax when I can never be certain that she is breathing? How can I breathe then? And I know it isn't easy for her; I can hardly imagine being so small yet hurting so much.

DON

Even though Little Sue's lungs are weak, and she is smaller than other children at her age, she's happy. You can just see it. She laughs more than she coughs. She smiles more than she cries.

ELIZABETH

Well, then I suppose she must be smiling constantly, from how often she cries.

DON

She is. She's the happiest little baby I have ever seen.

ELIZABETH

You're right.

DON

I try not to think about how our lives could be better. From how I see it, our lives are perfect. Of course, I wish more than anything that Sue would never know pain and that you could find some relief, but that just isn't possible for the moment.

ELIZABETH

I just wish things were more simple.

DON

I know, darling. Someday, things will be. Sue's lungs are weak now, but she'll grow stronger. Time heals.

ELIZABETH

Thank you, Don.

DON

Whatever we have to face, we'll do it together. You, me, and Sue.

ELIZABETH

I know.

DON

Dry your tears, darling. We have dandelions to gather.

(End of Scene 3.

Student Name: Isabella Perez  
Grade: 8  
School: Krimmel Intermediate School  
Title: The Poison of Beauty  
Category: Critical Essay  
Key: Silver Key  
Educator: Lisa Liessmann

Zombies, scrolling away at a small box in their hands feeding for the next like, video, and/or comment– that is what society is like now. TikTok and other platforms have easily made everyone addicted to their phones and it's difficult to find someone in society without any social media platform downloaded on their device. Some of the most popular communities online that have sprung out due to this are the beauty and workout community. We see people that are gorgeous posting with perfect bodies, clear skin, and all the latest products. Some of the most liked creators are focused on beauty. There's nothing wrong with wanting to feel your best, but what happens when people start to focus too much on it? We, as a society, are starting to see the repercussions of the emphasis on beauty, but we aren't doing anything to stop it.

People always want to criticize others for feeling pressured by these unattainable standards, but they never truly realize how these toxic ideals are thrown in girls' faces. Girls are always on social media and they see these perfect celebrities and influencers, but they never realize how fake these people are. Celebrities and influencers have so much money that they can afford to hire the best plastic surgeons and trainers. There's nothing wrong with these celebrities and influences wanting to change something they do not like, but it's the fact that they change their whole face and lie about it to fit an ideal standard. These celebrities and influencers know people think they are beautiful and they capitalize on this. They do sponsorships, ambassadorships, and other things that include beauty. What people see as harmless and pointless, others see it as a way of life. We are already seeing the repercussions of this toxicity by our beauty standard and how we view others in the real world. Individuals that are pretty and unique are shown as average and ugly however, the girls online have formulated their own standard by becoming cookie cut versions of each other. This is invading our reality when it is truly not obtainable.

As these standards start to become more normalized the more teens are affected by it. The people that are affected by this grow up to be insecure people that can't find happiness. They wear baggier clothes to hide their body because it isn't the "ideal" or "It Girl" body. A study concludes that one in five girls experience body image issues and 14% experience eating difficulties because of these celebrities. Ever since covid happened, more girls who hate something about their face are wearing masks. According to a report done, someone less attractive is mostly likely to wear a mask. The people that wear the masks for this reason feel comfort in the fact that no one can see them. These

insecurities are causing them not to even go to places. Most of them want to stay home and hide because of these standards. They see these celebrities that are living the “best life,” having the “ideal body,” the “doll face,” and wish they were like them. Even if others around them see it as fake and stupid, teens let it consume them and try to make it their ideal life.

As we grow up into adults we start to grow out of these insecure phases, but it can also transfer into adulthood. Most of the time, these teenagers turning into adults still feel insecure and are diagnosed with mental illnesses. The most common illnesses are depression and eating disorders. It is said, in an article, that most people who suffer from body image issues are most likely to be depressed and have eating disorders. They don't want to go outside and shy away from things because of how much focus they have on this. Eating disorders are when someone puts so much focus on how much they weigh they will starve or binge themselves on food. A study shows that one in eight adults have experienced suicidal thoughts because of body image issues. We put such a focus on this that we can cause people to commit suicide because they don't fit our “standards.” While committing suicide is one way out, there is another way that has sky rocketed through markets: Plastic surgery.

Plastic surgery is one of the leading industries currently in the world. This year alone, all aesthetic procedures accumulated 11.8 billion US dollars. This is evidence that plastic surgery is the new everyday thing. When people get this they believe they'll be the happiest they've ever been, but in reality they are never truly happy. They start to get even more surgery thinking it makes them happy, which is diagnosed as “body dysmorphic disorder.” A survey shows that plastic surgery increased by 49.4% in 2021 in comparison to 2020. As we see these standards more often as social media evolves, the more plastic surgery is getting done. Most of the time these people were coming back for a second procedure. 54.7% of people that were coming to get plastic surgery have already had a procedure done. With people feeling more insecure, the more plastic surgery is getting done. People are seeing this as normal and don't see what's wrong with this. Plastic surgery isn't bad but it starts to become something bad when it becomes so normalized. People put too much pressure and focus on the wrong things. Plastic surgery doesn't solve everything, most of the time these people need to learn self love. That's when they'll feel their best and escape this loop of trying to fit an ideal standard.

We, as a society, need to stop putting so much pressure on women to follow these standards. Everyone looks different for a reason. If we all look the same, what would make us original? We all aren't going to have clear skin, hourglass bodies, or tiny heads. Not everyone has the same bone structures because we come from different parents and backgrounds. We won't be super tan or super pale. If we continue to focus on these beauty standards, so many people will stop caring about the things that truly matter. If we as a society learn to not put so much emphasis on it, it will allow us to solve some of these problems. In the way we are going now it will only become worse as social media

evolves, and continues to normalize these toxic standards. Now, I implore the reader to walk with their head high, free from the virus of technology, and see the uniqueness in society free from the toxic standards of beauty.

Student Name: Lillian Shelton  
Grade: 8  
School: Doerre Intermediate School  
Title: The Protector  
Category: Science Fiction & Fantasy  
Key: Silver Key  
Educator: Melissa Reisdorf

As soon as Alinta heard the creak of aging wood on metal hinges, she knew that she was doomed. She leaped out of her bed, her nightgown blowing in the cold air. She quickly dressed, and her fingers fumbled as she struggled to light a candle. Her small feet barely touched the ground as she ventured out of the room.

"Hello?" Alinta said. "Jakob? Is that you?"

A cold finger slithered onto Alinta's shoulder, her countenance pale and fixed on the door that was a mere stride away. The finger tapped her shoulder softly, and Alinta nodded. The finger dug into her skin, but the young woman didn't react.

"I know. I shall be careful," Alinta said. "After all... eternal punishment awaits both of us if we are not."

"Hush now," a slightly hoarse whisper escaped from the owner of the finger. "We do not know who else may be watching us."

"Why should I be scared? Your word could condemn anyone who dares accuse you and I."

"Your courage does you credit, Alinta, but it may be the thread that unravels the cloak," the voice cut off as a bright flash of light streamed through the window. It let out a muffled scream of shock and the hand gripped the young woman's shoulder.

"They shall find me, you know this. Will you help call off the search?" Alinta's eyes met a cold, unforgiving gaze.

"I do not know, but I shall do whatever is in my power to stop this," the finger released Alinta's shoulder.

She scrambled to an empty box that had been littered on the floor, accompanied with a couple glass bottles. A sliver of the wood scratched her cheek as she crawled under the box, her breathing the only sound in the house.

"Oi, Helena!" a rough voice knocked harshly on the door, not covering up the din of a mob. "Open this door now!"

Footsteps echoed through the house and the doorknob twisted. "Good eve, sir," a silky, feminine voice said. "Pray tell what this is all about."

The sound of paper rustling was followed by the man's voice. "Miss Helena, the king has deemed for your house to be searched for a Creature."

A soft laugh escaped from Helena's lips. "A Creature in my home? There are none here, but you are welcome to search, if that pleases you," a loud creak echoed throughout the house as Helena opened the door.

Dust rained down upon Alinta as a foot kicked the box, the dust trickling up her nasal passages. She dug her nails into her skin, praying that the pain would distract her. The hairs on the back of her neck rose as she felt a small tickle. Her hand instinctively rose up to the back of her neck, and she was met with the solid shell of a beetle. Alinta went rigid, her nerves aching for her to run out of the box. The beetle ventured up her neck and onto her face, the young woman squeezing her eyes shut, breathing shakily.

"See? There are no Creatures in my house," Helena said.

"Apologies for disturbing you, miss," the man said, opening the door, but Alinta couldn't contain herself for a second longer. She knocked the beetle off her face, jamming her elbow into the side of the wooden box. Silence ensued, Alinta barely daring to breathe.

Light exploded in her face as the man kicked the box away, sending it flying into a wall. The man glared at her, glancing at Helena before another man grabbed Helena, tying her wrists together as she protested.

"So, what have we here?" the man smiled, his yellow-tinged teeth bared. "A Creature."

"She is no creature!" Helena screamed. "She is a human! Look at her!" Her captor struck her sharply across the face, and she fell silent.

"Ah, those beautiful ears and... unique eyes," the man grabbed Alinta by her hair and forced her to look at him. Her scarlet eyes met his dull brown ones, fire sparking inside her soul.

"Get your hands off of me," Alinta said, "and I will spare you from seeing me ever again."

"Hah! We know your lies, nymph-girl," the man snarled, jerking her head to the side to examine her delicately pointed ears.

"Do not call me by my species. I am an individual, and I wish for you to treat my kind as such."

"You Creatures are barely worth sixpence. Your kind should enjoy the little life you have, and allow us to rule you all peacefully."

“Peacefully!” Alinta threw back her head and laughed bitterly. “The murder of a thousand nymphs is considered peaceful to you? How about the obverse? Would you like to wake up one morning, blood coating the streets, and see a thousand of your kind dead?”

The man jerked her head back up and struck her across the face. “Silent, Creature, and maybe the judge will be lenient on you.”

Alinta’s lips pulled back to reveal long canines, white as snow and sharper than knives. The man dropped her hair and scrambled back, his countenance the color of fresh paper. Alinta rose and bared her teeth at the mob, dispelling them with a single glance, and she was soon alone in the house.

Her pale feet barely touched the ground as she ran swiftly through the tall grass that surrounded the house and led to the forest. She leaped over a log, her heels splashing in the cool river as she spotted a group of huts in the forest. Alinta landed on dry pine needles as she was greeted by a young nymph, giggling and tugging at her arm.

“Lin! Lin! Did you really go out there?” the little girl asked, her face full of awe. “Did you see a human?”

“Yes, Oceana, I did,” Alinta knelt down so she was the same height as the children. “Did you clean your riverbank?”

“Mhm! Is Father coming back soon?”

Alinta sighed a bit. “Your father is busy, sweetie. He has to stay and make sure that no humans find our forest, but he’ll be here as soon as he can. I saw him, and he helped me out of a tricky situation.”

“Wait... you were sighted?!” Oceana squealed.

“Unfortunately. But I scared them off.”

The little girl’s sea-green eyes widened with reverence and admiration. “Wow! I wish I could have seen their faces! I could have scared them too!” she opened her mouth and smiled as she touched her tiny canines.

Alinta’s lips curved into a grin. “Keep practicing, and you may become the next Protector,” she ruffled the little nymph’s curly hair and walked away.

A flash of brown hair quickly disappeared from atop a tree, and bits of bark rained down as the figure skidded down the tree. Alinta grinned even wider and silently dashed through the forest, her bare feet sliding across the ground.

The closer she got to the figure, the more frigid her gaze became. As soon as she was close enough to the figure, she grabbed it and threw it to the ground, pinning it.

"Who are you and what do you want?" she growled, baring her canines, but her words had barely escaped her lips when she saw that the figure she was pinning down wasn't armed... and was a young man.

"Get off me!" the young man choked, wincing as Alinta dug her fingers into his neck.

"Who are you?" Alinta repeated, trying to keep her voice sharp but it faltered slightly.

"Mikael. I'm from the village. Now can you please get off of me?!"

"The human village?"

"Yes! What other village- oh," Mikael stopped mid-sentence and stared at her pointed ears. "Are you..?"

"A nymph. Got a problem with that?"

"No, but my father does."

"How unexpected."

Mikael deflected her sarcasm with ease, unsettling Alinta. "He asked me to scout out the area."

"You must be a terrible spy if you'd tell your plans to the first Creature that crossed your path."

"You could've killed me. I didn't really have a choice."

Alinta smirked. "True, true. You humans really are weak."

"We killed 1,000 nymphs in one ambush once," Mikael covered his mouth the second he let out the words. "I... I'm sorry... I didn't mean-!"

"Talk and you die," Alinta said, her gaze cold. "You have no right to bring that up."

Mikael's mouth stayed closed as Alinta yanked him to his feet and dragged him into a hut. Several adolescent nymphs were in there, tending to their wounds or sharpening their weapons.

"Alinta! You found one!" a nymph said, stitching another nymph up.

"Yes," she replied, glaring pointedly at Mikael, "and he is going to tell us exactly when the human village will least be expecting an attack."

The nymphs chuckled and watched as Alinta tied Mikael to a chair. "Speak," an older nymph ordered, her eyes piercing Mikael like a hot iron.

"T-The village is going to have a m-meeting tomorrow. T-They w-won't have any patrols out," Mikael's brow was covered with cold sweat as every single nymph in the room glowered threateningly at him.

"Good. Who is your father, boy?" Alinta said.

"He's the v-village chief."

"So do you swear on your life that this information is accurate?"

"Y-Yes."

"Good. Anything else?" Alinta gripped his neck.

"W-Wait! H-How about I go ask my father if the nymphs can go free? It'd keep the casualties down."

"Do you think that I am an idiot?" she demanded. "I know you'll go and report all of your findings to your father. It'd be better off if I just killed you now. Any last words?"

"You can kill me," Mikael said, strangely calm, his beautiful sea-green eyes meeting Alinta's fiery red ones, "but the arrows shall be released the second you break my neck. I just want to protect my kin, something that is commonplace among all, regardless of species."

"Are you an idiot or something?"

"I'm not an idiot. Would you enjoy a reenactment of the Woodland Massacre?"

His words shoved grief into her heart, harsher than a red-hot serrated dagger. "You have no right to speak of such things."

"You did not answer my question. Would you?"

Alinta clenched her teeth. "No," she whispered hoarsely.

Mikael relaxed. "Then arrange a truce with my father."

A nymph stirred. "It is too easy, Lin, be wary," he murmured.

"I swear on my life that this is not a trap," Mikael said, his eyes meeting mine, clear and imploring.

Alinta carefully pried her sweaty fingers from the human boy's neck. "Fine. Take me to the village," she ordered. Two other nymphs, a male and a female, the female holding Oceana.

Mikael nodded quickly and stood up, his hand temporarily closing around Alinta's, before thinking better of it and retracting swiftly. A warm flush spread across Alinta's neck as the gathering ventured toward the human village, hunting knives drawn.

"Can I have a weapon?" Oceana asked Mikael.

"You're a child, no-! Mikael was interrupted

"Of course," the male nymph handed her a whittled tree branch, sharp enough to draw blood, oblivious to the distressed countenance of Mikael, who plucked it from the little nymph's hands and tossed it into the woods soon afterward.

Eventually, they arrived at the border of the now-silent woods. The female nymph gently set Oceana down on the leaves.

"Wait! I'm coming with you!" Oceana clung to her leg, her brow furrowed.

Mikael sighed. "She might help reason with my father; he's always had a soft spot for children," he said quietly.

"Keep your mouth shut, human," Alinta's patience wore thin as she gripped her hunting knife and sheathed it, as did the others.

The male nymph stared into the outskirts of the human village, star-struck. "This... is where the Murderers live," he breathed.

Mikael jerked back. "Murderers?!" he repeated.

"Humans."

The human stepped back, shaking his head, his face wan. "You all are sick," he said.

"The feeling is mutual," Alinta lied, finding it hard to look into his eyes without her words shaking and stuttering. A man with a sword on his belt and a finely-made tunic and pants, presumably Mikael's father, approached them, and Alinta's eyes widened. "You're the man who tried to arrest me," she growled.

"Well done, Creature," Mikael's father smiled maliciously. "And well done, son."

The nymphs whirled around, Mikael's face twisted with mixed feelings. "Wha-! Father!" Mikael protested, but his father raised a hand for silence.

Oceana kicked Mikael. "You set us up!" she hissed, her tiny canines bared.

"No one set anyone up," Mikael's father replied lazily, sticking out his hand at Oceana. "Hello, child." A soft grin flashed across his face as a ray of sunshine flashed on a bit of metal inside his sleeve.

Oceana looked at Alinta, and the latter nodded. "Do not be afraid, Oceana," Alinta whispered. "Be as strong as the oak trees."

The young nymph gingerly shook the man's hand. Time seemed to slow down as Mikael's father grabbed the metal in his sleeve and removed it, revealing a long, thin dagger. He pinned Oceana to the ground, her weak arms barely keeping the man's wrist away.

Alinta grabbed his wrist as well, straining as she slowly inched his wrist back, her sweaty fingers slipping slightly as she made her move.

“Get the Guards over here!” she gritted her teeth and looked imploringly at the two nymphs.

“Yes, Protector!” they said, sprinting towards the village.

Mikael stood to the side, helpless as he watched the dagger moving further away from Oceana’s neck, the tension in his father’s arm building with every movement.

“Alinta!” Oceana cried as her small arms buckled and Alinta’s fingers slipped from the release of pressure. The blade slid fluidly across the young nymph’s throat, her small hands gripping Alinta’s in a final embrace.

“No! Oceana?!?! OCEANA?!?!?” Alinta screamed as her calm, fiery demeanor broke, her grief pouring out like water over a riverbed.

Mikael’s father shoved Mikael away as he grabbed a torch from the wall and threw it into the forest. The dry leaves caught fire quickly and the flames roared with pleasure as the forest shrieked, agonized.

“GET AWAY FROM HER!” Alinta guarded Oceana’s broken body, but Mikael’s father shoved her aside, the flames not inducing a single reaction on her numbed nerves. The man yanked Oceana’s body up and shoved it into the flames, her adorable eyes glassy as her flesh sizzled.

“MIKAEL!” she sprinted towards the retreating Murderer, her knives blazing. The human turned towards her, his eyes red.

“Alinta! Alinta! Calm down! I didn’t know that my father wanted to kill you all!” he said, his hands shaking.

“YOU LIAR!” Alinta slashed one of her fire-touched knives at his face, and a red-hot cut appeared over his left eye.

The Murderer roared in pain, blood dripping over his face like a grotesque masterpiece. He threw a branch at her, grazing her arm, but Alinta had become a hurricane of destruction.

“YOU DID THIS! YOU PLANNED THIS ALL ALONG!” she exclaimed, throwing her knife at his head, missing by a centimeter. She clutched her final knife tightly, her red eyes feral.

“I did not!”

“THIS IS FOR MY MOTHER, FATHER, AND ALL OF THE OTHER NYMPHS THAT YOU MURDERERS HAVE SLAUGHTERED OVER THE YEARS! AND FOR OCEANA, A CHILD WHO YOUR FATHER KILLED!” Alinta slashed again and again. Mikael did not retaliate, only sparking her anger and grief more violently.

As she tossed the final knife at his arm, it made contact and he paused, wincing. “I’m... I’m sorry. I’m sorry that you will never forgive me. I’m sorry that your kind must suffer.

I'm sorry that I will never be able to make it up to you. I'm sorry that you have been without a loved one for so long" Mikael sobbed, his grief almost matching hers. "I... I wish that there was something that I could do to restore love to your heart."

Alinta stopped, her rage evaporating. "...Go. Run. Never, ever come back here again," she turned away, a tear running down her face as the lies fell from her lips and shattered onto the ground like broken glass.

Mikael didn't protest, the sound of crunching leaves echoing through the cacophony of the screams of her kin. Flames devoured the trees, trees that had been there since she was a child. Mikael's face was scarred into her mind, the feeling of his hand closing around hers a forbidden pleasure.

"I love you," Alinta whispered, her face overflowing with tears. She turned back around, and he was gone. Gone like her mother. Gone like her brother. Gone like her father and sister and cousin and aunt. Gone like Oceana and all of the other nymphs that were being consumed by the fire.

"I'll see you all soon," she took a deep breath, and stepped into the flames, embracing the ghosts of her past as the fire licked her skin and felt no more pain.

Student Name: Caroline Meyer  
Grade: 8  
School: Doerre Intermediate School  
Title: The Quiet Outing  
Category: Flash Fiction  
Key: Silver Key  
Educator: Melissa Reisdorf

Running through the hallway, kids pummeled into each other like bumper cars, knocking posters off of unsuspecting walls, and stepping on each other's shoes. It was a sunny Thursday as the doors to the school burst open with kids spilling out wherever they could find an opening.

Three friends walked on the narrow sidewalk pushing each other off with each step. They seemed determined to find a good restaurant where they could eat and work. They just needed some peace and quiet from noisy homes and school. Coming to the end of the sidewalk and a busy intersection they paused to figure out where to go next. "Straight and we go home, left and we're running into a big group of students at a sandwich shop, or right and we find somewhere new," the tallest one said, the others agreed to go right.

Although Jackie was much taller than the girls she hung out with she was nearly a year younger than them, but Kim and Lyla always made sure she knew that they would grow to be much taller than her it was only a matter of time. The three were lucky enough to have almost all of their classes together, but they never seemed to have a chance to talk other than walking through the hallways but they could never hear each other.

They started to walk through a creepy part of the town far from anyone else they would know, Jackie felt as if she was being watched but just brushed it off as tiredness from the long school day. The girls stumbled into a small diner and decided it would be a good spot to do their work. They sat down in a red booth and pulled out their laptops and began the missing work they seem to always have, despite working hard in class. A particularly short man came to the booth and asked what they wanted to eat, the girls got a basket of french fries and milkshakes, strawberry for Jackie and chocolate for Kim and Lyla. When the waiter walked away, Kim started to work on her design for the annual costume design contest that the local theatre held. It had always been her dream to win the grand prize of free tickets for a year and for her to be worn in the next play.

After about fifteen minutes, Lyla started getting antsy and wondering where the food was because she had barely had any food today. When she complained Kim pulled a small granola bar out of her bag and gave it to Kim to hold her over until the waiter came back.

The waiter came back with two other men and snatched the girls while yelling and took them outside. Lyla bit the tallest man there while trying to wiggle her way out of the strong grip of his hand. Kim kept kicking the shortest man with screaming for someone to come help them. Jackie stayed as calm as she could while slashing her small pocket knife at the large man holding her by the neck. When they made it to a dark alley, Kim had started crying and begging the man to let her go home, and the other two girls watched her while praying the men didn't get impatient and kill them. Lyla and Jackie had frozen when they heard a loud shot followed by silence. Kim was gone. Lyla forced her eyes open and felt the warm, sticky blood seeping through her clothes as she stared at the now silent Kim. She was terrified and wanted to turn away and never look back, but she couldn't take her eyes off Kim's distorted face. Jackie was shaking against Lyla's back as she started to get desperate and demanded to know what the men wanted with them and how they could make it alive. The three men stayed silent and watched the girls that had both started crying intensely and were begging for mercy from the towering men. Jackie hadn't even noticed that her eyes had been glued shut until she opened her eyes to look the stern men in the eyes. Lyla's screaming and begging didn't get her very far because soon her blood soaked into Jackie's t-shirt. Jackie screamed only to be muffled by a hard blow right to her head.

Student Name: Isabel Cicchetto  
Grade: 9  
School: Klein Collins High School  
Title: The Visit  
Category: Science Fiction & Fantasy  
Key: Silver Key  
Educator: Heather Boen

Raising my shaky hand, I meet the doorbell, its ominous tune causing my restless nerves to jitter as I wait for her arrival. The nervous feeling intensifies as I catch a glimpse of her silhouette through the darkly stained glass of the double doors. I can't help but wonder how I got caught in this terrible predicament.

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It's finally last period, and my enthusiasm for the day has already worn thin, soliciting a nagging migraine. It's so hard being a teenage girl, it has to be the worst experience anyone can go through! I rest my head against the cool window, observing as gray clouds move across the sky like dark blankets, hiding the sun. Ms. Serket's lecture is coming to an end. She quiets the class, and I sense a glare aimed at me, but I don't turn my head. I keep my eyes focused on Ms. Serket, trying to understand the point she has been trying to make throughout the entire class.

Ms. Serket assigned a book report on classic horror novels for this month's project. The books include Mary Shelley's 'Frankenstein', 'Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde' by Robert Louis Stevenson, and Bram Stoker's 'Dracula'. I had already read all of them and found solace in their gothic tales. I wondered what I would write about before the bell rang and my classmates hurried out of the room for the weekend. I pack up, still debating whether to do 'The Vampyre' or 'Carmilla' when the sound of footsteps draws me out of my peaceful thoughts. The sharp click click click click clack clicking of clunky kitten heels stops not too far from my Mary Jane's. My head raises to meet the gaze of the owner of those rather fashionable shoes. I swallow, her violet eyes staring down at me in interest.

"Greetings Rose " I managed to sigh.

Rose Lalonde is in my fifth and seventh period and from how she holds herself, nose upturned to everyone with dauntless stride, I assumed she was just some overzealous snob of a girl. However, those indifferent thoughts morphed into morbid curiosity after our first few meetings.

Rose is witty, from what I learned. Her tongue is sharp enough to cut the cheeks of those she taunts, and her manner of speaking is nothing short of snide and quick, she frustratingly knows exactly what to say at any given time. I'm positive I've seen her make at least three people since I met her. She is interesting. If not for her charming personality, it's her remarkable appearance. With a pronounced case of albinism, her appearance already demands the attention of others. The pearly white of her skin contrasts attractively with her black lipstick and abnormally purple-tinted eyes.

I end up finding myself drawn to her like a moth to flame due to her unconventional behavior. I will admit that I want to be close to her.

And from how she stares at me, I pray she does too.

"Kanaya, right?" The woman addressed me in a commanding tone, interrupting my thoughts. "I see you don't have a partner." Her voice was smooth and confident, with a lovely reading quality. But her lips formed an irreverent smirk as if she knew something I didn't. The contrast between her voice and expression made my stomach churn.

"I don't, but I wouldn't mind working with you" I answer, not being able to hide the small growing smile.

"Yes, that sounds great. Are you free tonight?" She is more forward than I am, I will admit. though it does not hinder my curiosity about her. Her bluntness is quite refreshing compared to the sugar-coded excuses of others, it makes something flutter in my gut.

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As her heavy doors open, they emit a grating screech similar to nails on a chalkboard, causing us both to step back in disgust. It brings me back to reality, and I can't help but chuckle at our parallel reaction. The silliness of it all causes me to hide my lips behind my hand. Searching for a welcome mat, I glance down, but to my misfortune, I don't see one. "So are you just going to stand out in the October cold or what?" She asks, but it technically doesn't count as an invitation, so I continue standing awkwardly in front of her door as she steps aside, holding it open for me.

"Oh, my mother always told me it's polite to get verbal consent when being allowed into someone's home," I breathe out the white lie with much ease" May I..... come in?" I hesitate awkwardly and her brow raises in curious confusion.

"Sure, you can come in Dracula." She says, smiling to herself, what is so funny about that? I let myself in and corrected her.

"It's Kanaya"

"I'm just joking Kanaya." Rose's voice was blunt enough, a silent way of implying how obvious of a joke that was. A flustered flush wants to make itself to my cheeks

"Sorry, It's hard to tell sometimes. I am not good with sarcasm."

"Oh, then we definitely won't have any problems." She made sure her sarcasm was obvious to me, which was appreciated also.

Her house was dark inside, barely any open windows were in sight and the small bits of light that did shine were from small electric candles placed around haphazardly. It almost seemed like some haunted mansion. Rose must have seen my curious glances as she led me up those marble stairs.

"My mother keeps forgetting to turn on the generator. I rather like the dark atmosphere though so I keep forgetting as well, I hope you don't mind."

"I don't, but might I ask where your mother is?" What seemed to be an innocent question just made Rose roll her eyes in response.

"She works late at night, so I doubt you'll see her at all. Now shall we start?" Rose brushes the topic off and reaches for my hand to drag me up to her room, it yanks back as if she were burnt.

"Sorry, I just wasn't expecting your hands to be so cold." She explains and places her warm hand back on mine. As she drags me up to her room, my focus is only on the warmth of her hand. My heart feels like it's attempting to burst through my ribs as she pulls me to her door. Her warm hand left mine to open the door, leaving me standing there like an oblivious idiot.

Rose's room seemed more lived in than the rest of the dusty halls of her home, with yarn lying about her floor and desk lazily as if she just happened to leave it there. Rose quickly used her leg to kick what seemed like a pile of possibly dirty clothes under her bed almost shyly. I picked up one of the books near where I placed my bag.

"I didn't take you for a Twilight fan." A proud smile creeps upon my lips as she flushes in embarrassment. She theatrically shakes her head and looks back at me.

"If you call hate reading being a fan, then yes, I am. But if we were to talk about quality Vampire novels, then I think you would enjoy Carmilla more." Once she mentions Carmilla, I've lost my composure, eager to smile and flap my hands onto my skirt.

"Oh, we must do our book report on Carmilla! I absolutely adore its storytelling with Laura's point of view and the fascinating relationship between her and her dearest companion!" I practically ramble out, Rose's face slightly appalled by my random burst of excitement, for a moment I was sure she was about to berate me as her shocked face contorts, looking like she was thinking hard on what to say next, but much to my shock, she smiles widely and nods in agreement. I let out a breath I didn't know I was holding.

"I do like it too, though I guess I like it more for the symbolism of loss of childhood, or girlhood specifically," Rose says coolly and I feel my cheeks wanting to flush, I rather

enjoyed it more as a romance than its intended psychological horror. If Rose saw my embarrassed apprehension, she didn't mention it, reaching for a pile of paper and pencils for us to begin. Rather self-consciously, I began looking at my flushed face, relieved that my embarrassment did not color my face in an unsightly but disappointed that my dark lipstick was smeared a bit. Using the tip of my nail, I fixed it before meeting Rose's gaze in her mirror, or at least as well as someone like me can. She did a double take after I moved away and laughed somewhat, why was she laughing? Was there something odd about my face? She seemed to notice my confusion and answered.

"From the angle I was at, you looked like you didn't have a reflection. How silly is that?" Rose said and my headache.

"Ah, yes, how..... Um, silly" I reply, a bit too hesitant for my liking. Her brow raised in the way it always did, in suspicion. Though luckily she just left it alone and went about writing her part of the report. I sat with her and we wrote in silence for however long before she broke it.

"Why do you speak so elegantly? I mean, I'm one to talk right, but I still sound like I'm from this century." This catches me off guard completely by this! Yes, my choice of words does seem to be...more flowery, but people can still understand me! Unlike her fragrant use of sarcasm, I hardly know what she's thinking when she speaks ironically, it's almost admirable how her mind puzzles me! A huff escaped my nose and my hunger-based headache throbs slightly.

"I do not know what you mean, I'm just speaking how I was taught to Rose." I snap back, realizing I took a minute too long to answer, making Rose's cheeky smirk grow at my embarrassing fumbling.

"I never said it was anything bad, Kanaya. Take it as a compliment will you? I like how it sounds." her voice didn't waver, nor did it hold an ounce of insincerity. The confident confession threw me off my feet and I couldn't help but stare down at the floor silently with no snide comment. But whatever I was thinking, or wasn't saying, was suddenly interrupted by a flash of thunder crashing us back into reality. Her eyes looked out my bedside window in shock, the sky was dark and night had approached rather quickly. I responded to her reaction by checking my watch. My heart drops at the sight of it.

"Oh my, how time flies, it's almost 11:30!" I tapped my watch as if it would change what it read, but it didn't. I turn to Rose and she's just as dumbfounded as I am. But unlike me, Rose shakes it off, her always churning mind already planning what to do next. Her face twists as she thinks, she's always thinking.

"Why don't you stay the night? I'm sure it would be a pain for your parents to pick you up this late and in a storm" Rose finally decides. I want to decline, no, need to decline. It would not be safe if I stayed. What if she finds out how terrible I truly am? As much as I yearn to stay with her for longer, yearn to continue talking to her, yearn for her irony-

laced jokes, to bite back at those witty remarks, I solemnly shake my head. After what feels like the longest minute of my life, she shakes her head disapprovingly.

"No Kanaya, I insist. Please" My head throbs once more, convincing me to stay. Her desperation makes me question truly what she intends. I begin to speak but a yawn bubbles to my throat and I fail to cover my mouth in time for her to comment.

"Have you always had such sharp teeth by any chance?" My hand instinctively hides my mouth from her, she smiles in that irreverent way she did earlier and my heart stops. Has she found out?

"Yes. It is nothing but a common gene in my family." The excuse came out smoothly as it always did but her skeptical raised brow almost made me falsely doubt myself.

"Did that gene also carry such pale skin?"

"Ironic that you mention pale skin. But I do believe the term you are looking for is 'washed out'?" She flushes in slight embarrassment or anger at my correction, placing her papers into her backpack.

"I have color in my skin. You don't seem flush or turn red no matter the heat or embarrassment" Rose mentions calmly. What is she getting at here? She just knows how to poke at the soft spots in the armor. I begin to shut her down but she interrupts my stuttering answer.

"Your skin is also quite chilling, at least for a girl who hides so much of it." Rose moves her gaze back to mine, her ghastly curiosity shivers me to the core. My icy hands clam up, her eyes flickering down in excitement to see my restlessness. Despite how offended I feel by her prodding and poking, I can't help but admire the way she knows exactly what to say.

"Remember how you refused to enter my house without a proper verbal invitation? I held the door open and gestured for you to come in, but you stood and waited instead!" Rose speaks curtly, emphasizing her point. Rose speaks curtly and it just makes my head quite dizzy with all this mention of eating. She's so skillfully backed me into a corner that I cannot find myself being bothered by it.

"My mother always said it was polite -" I attempt to lie but she impedes derisively again.

"Oh, I'm sure she does Kanaya. Let me put you in my perspective: an alarmingly beautiful girl shows up and despite how tan she is, has no blush to her skin, doesn't eat food at all, has these sharp fangs, is colder than death, has no reflection, and did I mention supernaturally gorgeous? Surely our book report could help you realize my hypothesis" Rose points at the copy of Carmilla we've been using. Her repeated praise toward my looks lightens my mood somewhat but it doesn't cease the worrying hunger in my stomach. Is she implying that I am a....

“Rose, you are being frivolous. Vampires don't exist. Are you sure you are well?” I shut her silly idea down, but her face furrows in determination, a sight I surely don't mind at all. Her hand is swift as she pulls a pair of scissors from her bag and within the blink of an eye, slices into her hand, her face scrunches in pain but I do not pay much attention to that as a gasp is released from me.

It is a brilliant crimson and she lets it drip from its wound as if it was nothing. A hand rushes to cover my nose in an attempt to not breathe in the vile metallic scent but it's too late. My throat screams in thirst and my headache swells with a pinching sensation. Her voice is too far away for me to make anything out, my eyes are too focused on that bleeding hand of hers. Mine was busy idly gripping the bed sheets to cover my aching canines as they stuck out from my lips uncomfortably. I can't breathe, I do not need to and yet it still aches not to. I swallow thickly and my spit sticks to my throat like glue. I can't do this, I just can't. My head swells more.

“What is it, Kanaya? Can't handle a little blood” Her voice was coy, she knew her effect on me and it was no use denying it any longer.

Before I could gather my bearings, her warm hand lands on my shoulder to shake me and I lose myself. She yelps when I lunge at her, holding her palm to my mouth while wrapping my other around her other arm and waist. Her shoulders tensed in shock, as she gaped down at me. It doesn't take long before I draw my fangs into her. They pierce through her skin like butter, and I shamefully enjoy how her tendons and muscles bend and tear. Rose gasps loudly, still too shocked to try to get away. Her blood is like haute cuisine, tasting rich and saccharide. Not unlike a sweet wine. though that could be part of my Vampiric palette. Her heart beats against my chest as if it were trying to break both of our ribs simultaneously yet I cannot seem to care, taking mouthful after mouthful. It drips from my chin, and down onto her arm.

I don't remember when my eyes closed but when she inhales sharply, they open to gaze up at her sickly frame. Her cheeks and lips have lost most color in them, eyes squinted as if she's trying so hard not to faint, her brows furrowed and relaxed while her head lolls to her shoulder. Her body feels weak in my grip and it takes a great deal of strength to attempt to pull away from her.

“Rose?” My voice is weak and gurgled from the blood still going down my throat. She looks at me, almost imperially and I feel myself pale.

“Wow.” Rose crooks out, I'm about to sputter out an apology before she interrupts

“Twilight fucking lied.” I stared at her in disbelief, but before I had time to respond, she became limp in my arms. Her body lay back, threatening to take me down with her. I lightly let her descend to the bed, watching her lay there still, too still.

Student Name: ricky rivera

Grade: 9

School: Klein Forest High School

Title: The War of Kraker Hills

Category: Short Story

Key: Silver Key

Educator: Danae Perez

"Arthur, Anakin come here now!" shouted Abigail. She was done with the way Anakin and Arthur would go out for hours shooting arrows at trees and animals. "Alright buddy we better get back to the house before your mom kills us with these arrows" said Anakin. Anakin and Arthur rush back to the house. Abigail greets them and lets them know that dinner is ready. They sit down and Arthur starts to talk about their day out hunting and shooting arrows, all of a sudden. \* knock knock knock\*. Someone was at the door, Anakin got up, revolver in hand and opened it. 2 men stand before him, "Hello there Mr. Dome we are the Kraker Hills Detective Agency, and we would like to give you an option" said the first officer. "You got 2 minutes to explain why the hell you are on my lawn before both of your brains are on my grass," Anakin replied. "You might want to hold off on that" said the officer, "we want to give you an option". "Yeah and what's the option?" said Anakin. "well as you know you are a wanted man, and as you may also know a war is going on between Kraker hills and stronghold and they are coming your way so we would like to give you the option to join the U.S army and all of your crimes will be wiped off your record so you can have a good life". "I'll give it a thought, now get off my yard before you have bullets for eyes" says Anakin. "As you wish Mr.Dome".The officers leave the area . As night falls Anakin begins to think about his life not on the run, he thinks about how he and his family could live a normal life. No gunning down officers, no running at every sign of trouble just staying put. The next morning Anakin gets up and ready's his bow and revolver to go hunting, he kisses his wife and tells his son "if I don't come back protect your mama, boy". Arthur says "yes sir I promise to protect mama" "good kid" anakin says. Anakin rides along the red river looking for deer to hunt for supper when he remembers the offer he was given the day before. He thinks about it for a second and dismisses it but he remembers what one of the officers said "they are coming your way".What does he mean by coming my way Anakin thinks, then he hears shouting in the distance with the ring of bullets in the air. He rushes back to his home and when he gets there he sees his house burned down, and 10 men in black coats with military equipment and he immediately thinks "is my wife and arthur ok?". He goes to talk to the military and asks who did this and is his wife and child ok. The leader of the men says "we burned this house down and they are dead, you will be next if you act like your child". Anakin feels his heart drop then the next thing he sees is 9 dead men on the floor and one still alive so he asks the one who ordered them to come his way and they say general Jim

Ross. He shoots the man and then Anakin realizes his guns might be destroyed and his 2 revolvers are his best friends. The right hand one names mercy and the left hand one less. Together they are merciless. He tears apart the rubble and goes into the cellar that's below the ground and retrieves his 2 revolvers and Lancaster repeater. He digs through the rubble for his wife and child dead burned bodies and buries them before he goes to the police station. Anakin arrives at the police station and asks if the offer for joining the military is still up and the officer says "yes it is but we need to get you out today". "Ok" Anakin replies. Anakin heads out to the military base and receives his uniform. He is asked if he wants to use his guns or the military's and he says his, so he takes his uniform and goes to his bunk to get a good sleep before going to the front lines the next morning. He gets up the next morning and gets into his uniform, he then puts his holster and bandolier on and walks to the mess hall to eat breakfast before leaving. He and his platoon are on the way to the war field and when they get there bullets are ringing in the air. They rush to the bunker where their men are hiding. Anakin asked why they were hiding and not fighting back. "We are surrounded, we have no chance of winning if we leave the bunker" a random soldier replies. Anakin gets up and runs outside and hides behind the fort of sacks and ready's his Lancaster repeater. He gets upon the barricade and aims. He shoots and hits a man in the head instantly killing him. He gets down to protect himself from an array of bullets. He peeks around the barricade and a bullet wizzes past him, almost getting him in the head. He gets back around the wall and looks at his gun and he sees his wife and son looking back at him through the reflection. He thinks about his goal and he needs to avenge his family so he pulls out both revolvers and starts to fire. The rest of the army men see him firing and start to aid him in shooting. The stronghold army stops shooting and gets down. Anakin proceeds in the field and fires at the men and tries to avoid their bullets and he gets to the next barricade that has a gatling gun attached to it. He tells his platoon to proceed to him and get to new cover and he will cover him. He gets upon the gatling gun and shoots at the men. They all stop firing and Anakin sees a ball coming towards him. It's a grenade. He immediately grabs it and tosses it back but he tosses it the wrong way and it hits at the feet of his platoon and it explodes killing multiple of his men. He stares, frightened at what he has done. He gets back to reality and starts firing at the stronghold men protecting the rest of his platoon. Him and his men get over the bodies of stronghold men and into their bunker. Anakin and his platoon surround them and make them their prisoners. They write a letter and include a photo of the stronghold men in it and send it to general Ross, the general of the stronghold army and Anakin and his platoon celebrate the win and thank Anakin for his bravery.

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After 2 weeks the letter that Anakin and his platoon sent to the general finally arrived to him. The general is told a letter arrived for him and he reads it and it says, " We have your men and if you want them back to you alive you better meet up with me Anakin dome, or else they all get killed - Anakin and platoon 34" \*photo inside envelope\*. "GOD DAMN

THAT ANAKIN" said the general, "IWILL HAVE THAT MAN KILLED, SEND ROMAN RIGHT NOW, PLUS A HUNDRED MEN WITH OUR BEST EQUIPMENT". Meanwhile Anakin is being presented with a badge of honor and being promoted to a sergeant for his bravery on the battlefield and skills. Anakin is presented with the award and begins his speech "I would like to thank all of you and say I will be leaving the army as soon as I kill the general of stronghold because-" Anakin was interrupted with an array of bullets flying at him and his platoon of men. They all duck but some of the men die. Anakin grabs his revolver from his holster and begins to fire. He unsheathed his sword that he obtained from the first battle he was in. He gets up and runs into the bullets deflecting them with his sword and shooting back at the men while shouting at his platoon to cover him. He runs to the closest barricade and gets behind it. He peeks around the corner and shoots three men with 2 shots. Then he hears someone step beside him, he turns towards the man who is behind him and he sees this 7 foot tall bulky man standing over him. Anakin immediately unsheathes his sword and begins to attack him, the man also has a sword and starts blocking Anakin's attacks with it. They begin to throw attack after attack but no one seems to be hitting each other, until Roman gets a good hit and is able to slice Anakin's left arm off with his sword. Anakin screams in agony and right as Roman is about to finish him Anakin raises his right arm and shoots Roman in the head killing him instantly. The stronghold army retreats and Anakin's army buddies come and help him get to the infirmary. He gets to the infirmary and has his arm wrapped up and the doctors tell Anakin "you won't be able to survive it but you do still have some time left if you want to close any loose ends". Anakin is in despair he never even got to avenge his wife and child. But he decided he will. He gets up and applies his holster with one hand and grabs both guns and places them in his holster. He also sheaths his sword and goes to the general of his army. "I would like to go and find the general of the other army, he is the only reason I joined and I would like to end him before I die" Anakin says. "Ok I completely understand sargent dome, if you want to go and kill this man as your final wish then I Won't stop you" the general says. Anakin proceeds to the prison where they keep their prisoners of war. He goes and grabs the closest stronghold prisoner and drags him out of the cell. "What's your name" Anakin say's, "my name is fuck you" the prisoner said as he spits on Anakin's shoe. Anakin beats the prisoner with his gun. "One more time before you are dead WHAT IS YOUR NAME? " Anakin yells. "My name is Hosea Marston " Hosea says. "Ok Hosea, you are coming with me, you are going to take me to your army base and straight to your general" Anakin says "ok but please don't kill me" Hosea replies "no promises" Anakin says. Hours later it's the dead of night and Anakin and Hosea continue their journey across the land to the stronghold army base. Anakin on horse and Hosea on foot, Hosea begins to say "hey do you think we can stop for a second my feet are hurting" "no we need to get to your army base tonight" Anakin replies.

"Is it because of your arm right there?" Hosea says. Anakin stops and stares at Hosea and says "no tonight is the night your general dies because he is the man who ordered for my wife and son to die". "Revenge is a fool's game" Hosea says "what" replied anakin.

"Either way you wont get your wife and child back it would just end with him dead and you still without a wife and child!" "You are right, I will still be alone" Anakin says. "But I am completely fine with that " Anakin continues "as long as general Ross dies." "NOW COME ON" Anakin shouts, Anakin pulls Hosea on to the horse and he rides towards the stronghold base. They arrive and it is swarming with army men, Anakin grabs his binoculars and surveys the area. He asks Hosea where the generals' living quarters are. "His living quarters are at the south wing, to enter you would have to walk through all the guards and that is basically impossible with the way you look" Hosea says. "You have a uniform" Anakin says to Hosea "no I'm not giving you my uniform." "Ok well I guess I'll just take it from your dead corpse" Anakin says, "NO! Fine, but I need a uniform too because you would need help in there." "Ok I will go down there and take out a guard and put on his uniform" Anakin says, "ok but be careful they are heavily armed" Hosea replies. Anakin heads down and takes out his sword with his last hand and crouch walks to the guard. He stands and slices the man's head off and drags the body with one hand to the bushes behind him. He puts on the uniform and continues into the base with Hosea by his side. They enter and walk nonchalantly towards the big estate that the general lives in. They enter and Hosea shows Anakin towards General Ross's office and they enter. Hosea says "General you have a visitor, A Mr. Anakin dome". The general turns quickly and whispers to his 2 ferrets named Raiden and Lang "cage now". The 2 ferrets run to their cage and the general closes it behind them. "So you are the famous Anakin, I thought you would be tougher" the general says. "I'm as tough as they get" Anakin replies, "Not as tough as Roman I'm assuming" the general says as he nods towards Anakin's wrapped up arm. "Well he is dead and I'm not so who is really the toughest" Anakin strikes back. "You have a bit of a temper, Anakin, drink?" the general asks. "No I won't drink until you are dead" Anakin replies, "well I guess you won't ever have a drink again, shall we begin or do you want a weapon first?" the general says. Anakin unsheathes his sword and holds it up with one hand while the other is still bleeding. The general grabs his sword he has mounted on the wall and ready's it. They circle each other before Anakin throws the first blow. The general blocks it and throws his own blow but Anakin blocks that. They go on like this continuing to fight and knock over multiple things across the room one being a very expensive whiskey bottle that rolls into a corner. Anakin is only interested in attacking and only being defensive in times when he is being attacked. He tries to finish the fight but it's getting hard to do it because his arm is getting tired and he doesn't have another arm to use. He tries to do a final swing to finish it but the general swiftly parry's it and stabs Anakin in the stomach and laughs hysterically. "You really thought you could beat me, I'm better no one will ever beat me" the general says. "Just because I'm down doesn't mean you won" Anakin says, raising his hand and firing a single shot and hitting the general's head. The general looks up and rips off his hat revealing a bullet hole straight through it and blood in the back. He falls down and when he falls Anakin begins to crawl to the corner. He grabs the whiskey that fell earlier and opens it. He takes a drink and begins to close his eyes. He takes one last breath and the whiskey falls out of his hand. Hosea enters and looks at Anakin and the general dead. He goes to the Kraker hills

military base to tell them that Stronghold surrenders. When he gets there he sees the base destroyed and overrun with stronghold men. Turns out the general saw Anakin coming his way and sent out his whole army to take over the main Kraker hills base. Hosea hates the way the war turned out so he abandons his role in the army. Kraker hills surrender and Stronghold wins the war. Hosea begins a new life and still thinks about Anakin and how he turned Hosea's life around.

THE END...

Student Name: Surabi Yogarajah  
Grade: 9  
School: Klein High School  
Title: Three People  
Category: Personal Essay & Memoir  
Key: Silver Key  
Educator: Valeria Hero

### Three People

My name is Surabi.

Introducing myself is a burden. Mentioning myself on paper is more simplistic. This is how life should go. I shouldn't be wasting my time, merely thinking about what pronunciation I should use.

surabi [sur bee'] n. 1 the state of being naive and blithe

The jocular "Sur-bee" was exhibited at the beginning of age four. You can tell by the 'bee.' Tranquility and bliss had filled every breath I had taken so far. Life was filled with the fresh aroma of opportunities and buzzing imminent experiences such as riding a bike, tying your shoes, learning a sport, and many more innumerable things. I always had new friends made by shared interests and a humongous stuffed bear by my side like an inanimate squishy friend. However, the buzzing essence of "Sur-bee" somehow produced subpar grades. The mistakes and blunders were all excused by my youthful demeanor, and each blemish had manufactured a shiny, open window. Through that shiny, open window were some saccharine fruits growing on some trees.

"Amma, I spilled some water!"

"Get me a towel, and I'll clean it! Please be more careful."

As I grew, I learned that the 'sweet fruit' mentioned provided the excuses for being 'too little' or 'too naive.' The honeyed flavor of fruit nonetheless develops into a bitter tang of dissatisfaction. The dissatisfaction of 'growing up,' can be compared with too much lemon juice in the honey.

surabi [surah'bee] n. 2 A confused pedant or stickler for accuracy

Wanting to prove to my elementary classmates that I wasn't incapable, I worked doggedly during the infamous quarantine of 2020. Elementary school was over.

The era of excuses and ignorance was over.

"Amma, I accidentally spilled some water!"

"So careless! Go get some towels and wipe it yourself!"

I met my two best friends, Perfection and Envy, at twelve. Pinned to the ground, I was drugged with high expectations and perfect grades. To this day, I'm still held hostage by Perfection and Envy. I do not seek to escape.

Additionally, I was tossing good grades ubiquitously. I also made sure to take good care of my skin and body. Perfection's criticisms had undoubtedly come in clutch. I had to fit into every puzzle.

Nevertheless, Envy had convinced me that it wasn't enough, in any case. I had to do better.

My other preeminent friends had extraordinary achievements that I yearned for. Everyone had specialties while my concoction of specialties was rather confused. Pianist over here, karate brown belt over there, choir vocalist, writer, blah blah blah. Who was I? Supposedly, I was "Surah-bee."

surabi [soo(r)uhbi] n. 3 To dissemble the verity

Why does one tend to dissemble their real existence and opinions just to please other individuals? Why does status matter so much?

The sweet, innocent "Soor-a-bee" with a rolled 'r' in her name was always kind to her Indian elders. This was the demure and virtuous girl who heeds the rules and expectations. The girl produced a babylike and cherubic voice that unbounded the strings of gullibility. Polite as she is, her emotions are kept in the cage of her heart. If an Indian aunty needed assistance with anything, such as unplugging a charger cord or setting up the pooja materials, this was the darling.

"Surabi, I accidentally spilled some water. Would you mind helping me clean it?"

“No of course not! I would love to help!”

Did I like this persona? Probably not. I don't think it's very authentic. Will it help me be respected? Yes. Yes, it definitely will. Will it help me be honored by my community? Maybe?

I never knew that three different pronunciations could make three different people. Based on my life experiences, society will manage to gather interpretations of an individual based on their actions whether it be good or bad. Nevertheless, my name, invariably, is Surabi. I'm still one person.

Pronounce it however you like.

Student Name: Jordan Perrott

Grade: 11

School: Klein Oak High School

Title: Used To

Category: Short Story

Key: Silver Key

Educator: Lauren Bibeault

A quiet, but constant whistling. That was all the noise there was. Like the wind itself was reaching out its arms to find someone, anyone. It was hard to find that in those desolate plains. The wind hit thin, sickly trees, then the leaning walls of a simple house. It didn't stop there, of course, as if dissatisfied, it moved on; departing just before the next gust found the poor excuse for an oasis.

Inside the house, there was a pair, a mother and a son. There used to be three, but not anymore. The two had lived on the bare minimum for nearly 7 years, but supplies were getting scarcer still. The roof was galvanized steel plates, somehow still withstanding intermittent barrages of acidic rain for years.

"Momma, momma! Let's go play outside!" A child excitedly bounced beside his mother, tugging her dress incessantly.

"In a minute, dear. Lunch first," She finished opening a can of tomato soup, then got two bowls out, and poured the soup. Cold still, because they'd run out of fuel for any fire 2 weeks ago. That was concerning in itself, winter was coming soon. "Okay, it's ready-" She turned around and the boy was gone, already outside. She set the bowls down and ventured outside.

The boy was leaning on a post, facing the way the wind went as if he wanted to take flight and follow, just to see. Just to see if anything else, if anyone else was out there. He knew not to leave the shelter of the house, until the winds stopped, lest he get dust in his eyes. But if dust was all he saw anyway, what difference would it make? He thought the sky looked terribly lonely, maybe he could help it somehow, but he didn't know how.

"Tell me, about before, please" the boy requested, more reserved than his last request, coughing a little.

The woman gave a pained smile, pained for the fact he would never see what was before, and that she couldn't help his ailment, smiling because at least she could tell him.

"Well, there used to be these great, big towers of metal and glass, that were so tall they could touch the sky, before the sky was so lonely. And people worked in them, lived in

them. A bunch of those buildings together made a city, and the people inside those cities were business people," She lowered herself onto a bench on the porch, "I only went a few times to those cities. When I was younger, 25 or so. Any time after that, the air was too smoggy to tolerate."

"How come?" He scrambled up the bench to join her.

"Because we hurt the Earth. We hurt it too much to take back,"

"Where are the cities?"

"All over, the nearest was about 200 miles northeast. In other countries too,"

"How far is 200 miles? Can we see the city from here?"

"Oh, no, I'm afraid 200 miles is much too far to see the city," she laughed a little at the thought, "And before you ask, we also can't go to see the city. I'm not even sure there would be a city to see,"

"Aw, why not? I bet I could run there!" he jumped up and bolted into the house, coming back a few seconds later, climbing back up on the bench, out-of-breath and nearly coughing again even from that.

"I'm sure you could, but I can't," she smiled kindly, apologetically. She knew he certainly wasn't healthy enough to go, but there was no helping it.

"There were lots of people in the cities, right?"

"Yes, millions of people,"

"How much is millions?"

"Enough to fill from here to the edge of what you can see with people,"

He stared at the great empty, trying to imagine that many people, "That's a lot of people... Can't they help?" The boy looked expectantly outward.

"Help what, dearest?" She returned

"I don't know. Help us?"

"Hm.. that would be hard. We're rather isolated here, see?" She nodded generally to the land, sandy and cracking.

"I guess you're right. But how did we get here then?" his head tilted

"I had a car once, but not now" she sighed,

"What's a gar?" he inquired

"Well, a gar is a fish, we had cars. Cars were metal shells with engines and wheels that were used by everyone at one point. They contributed to this," she gestured to the great expanse of dust and wind,

"Ohh, and fish lived in water? I can't imagine there was ever enough water to live in,"

"Yeah, in rivers and lakes. There are oceans too, 7 of them. Those oceans occupy 3/4 of the planet. Though I can't say I know if they do anymore. They're probably pretty dry now too."

"The well isn't dry though,"

"No, I don't know why it's not, but it isn't,"

"Did cities have wells?"

"Something like them, running water actually. That used a lot of water,"

"And where did they go, the people in the cities?" he continued,

"They.. aren't here anymore," she tried to word it carefully, not wanting to explain the concept of death to him.

"Like how Papa isn't here anymore?" he asked too innocently.

"Yes, not here, like Papa," she glanced out to a grave, unmarked, save for a few stones making a vague perimeter, a dozen yards from the miraculously untainted well.

"Oh, the wind stopped- Could you get the bucket?" she stood and prompted the boy,

"Okay!" he went off inside, and she started walking to the well. She thought she heard something like a crash inside, but the boy came back out soon after, so it was disregarded,

He handed her the bucket as they reached the well, and she roped the handle and dipped it into the blackness below. It took longer to reach the water every time. A few minutes later, they pulled the bucket back up, with fairly clean water.

"I'll water the trees if you could pull back the tarps for me" she started toward the first tree "Oh, and remember to replace them before the rain starts," she reminded,

"Right, the rain always comes after the winds," the boy agreed,

"Actually, it didn't used to, and there used to be tall, healthy trees; grass too," the woman brought the water bucket to the tree, "the grass here used to be soft. I used to lay in it and stare up to the sky for hours, back when it was blue and full of clouds,"

"I remember it was blue here once, I think," he was trailing behind her, moving the tarps from the barely viable ground so the water permeated,

"Yes, after a particularly bad storm. I'm surprised you remember, that was nearly 3 years ago," she tipped a bit of water onto the roots.

"I know papa was there too, but he got sicker after. He said he saw the sky one more time after that..."

The last tree was watered, and just in time, for the thunder to inform on the rain's encroaching presence. She guessed 10, maybe 15 minutes before it was on top of them.

"Go inside and wait for me, okay?"

The boy looked dejected, wanting to stay outside longer, but even he knew the rains wouldn't be good to be out in, so he went back in the house.

She walked to the grave, bringing a pebble she'd found in the bucket.

"Sorry. I know you didn't want him to know about it before all this," she knelt near what would be the headstone, "He's just so persistently curious, I know we won't last much longer anyway; whether it be the same sickness as you, or just running out of supplies. I know it won't make a difference, but he's brighter when I answer questions. Maybe even he forgets, if ever briefly, when I answer," after placing the pebble next to another stone, she stood again and walked to the house.

She expected to find him beneath the table, under the bed, or in the covers. He got scared during the storms, even if it was mild. But he wasn't anywhere. She also looked to find where the noise came from earlier, only to see one bowl on the table, no sign of the other, on the floor or elsewhere.

Strange. Did he take his bowl somewhere? The rain should've started by now but it's still quiet... the bowl remained on the table untouched, as she turned to check outside.

Sure enough, he was outside, and there was still no rain. Not even the scent of rain, although any semblance of the old scent of rain was contorted by the chemicals dissolved in it.

When did he even get outside? And why hasn't the rain come by now? She began walking to the boy. He was a good twenty yards from the porch, just standing there, back to the house. Still no bowl, but it didn't feel important for some reason.

"Why are you outside? The rain will start soon," She saw he was looking to the sky, in awe, as if he saw something new.

"What do you mean? I see the blue sky and clouds again! Can't you?" his eyes didn't leave the sky, even as he started violently coughing, then collapsed.

"No! Not again!" She knelt and held the boy, whose eyes were still glued to the gray sky. Her fears of his ailment returned fully, her spouse died in much the same manner; seeing a bright and blue sky just once more.

"The sky... It's not lonely anymore. It's finally warm again,"

"Please- I'll be as lonely as the sky without you..." she hugged the boy, selfishly wishing to keep him there, for her own sake,

"Sorry, Momma, but I think Papa's waiting though," he pointed to the well, to the grave.

She didn't look where he pointed. She closed her eyes and held the boy tighter still. She didn't move for the longest time, hours, maybe even days.

When the cold pervaded her again she was in a house, on a bed. Little light offered itself to her eyes, very early morning, as usual. That same dream, the dream of her only son dying, felt like purgatory, never allowing good or long sleep. The woman coughed very similarly to the boy, the boy not very long dead, in the grand scale. But on her scale, it had been an eternity.

She stepped out of the bed lacking warmth, to be greeted by air of a similar temperature. Shaky legs weak from hunger; the food had lasted almost 9 years, although the people consuming it had thinned out to a lone person in the last 3. She reached for the wall in the dark, wishing to go outside, perhaps to get water, if she was right about there being no wind or rain.

Sure enough, neither wind nor rain threatened to hinder her veritable trek to the well. In all the years since they'd chosen that place, in all the years since the grass had dried and the trees had died; in all those years, the well still remained viable, somehow.

Maybe a few years ago she would have praised the heavens that it was still giving water. But not now. The woman was bitter now. Now she only cursed the well in all its steadfastness. A sign that the air and land will likely return someday far from then. She missed her son, her ever inquisitive son, who asked questions about the world, to try and know the world he could never have known. She wished he would return, like the air and earth would return someday.

Oh. In the haze of starvation, or maybe sleep deprivation, she'd forgotten the bucket inside. Well, that's fine too. Almost better, to not give that damn well the satisfaction of her reliance any longer. Instead, she just sat on the edge of the porch, leaning on a pole, staring into the empty; as if waiting for herself to grow spindly, brittle wings. Wings to take her far, far away from this place repurposed into an awful perdition for a species. Not to see if there were others. Just to finally leave. Her son probably would've wanted to fly as well, if only to see if there were cities still intact. Her son wasn't here though. Only her.

A fervent fit of coughing, worse than previous times. She stood, slow and weak, as though she were decades more than her true age. Stepping off the porch, barely thankful for the wind's abeyance. Not even 10 paces from the house, she was suddenly on the ground, after losing balance from a sudden onset of vertigo. Maybe from starvation, or

having lost much sleep over the past years. Or maybe even the ailment, the same that killed off her family, and very likely any other people left.

Yes. Probably the ailment, given that the sky was blue and clear again, despite the sun not having risen yet. He was right, it was warm again, even if briefly. It still felt lonely to her though. Maybe because she still had yet to look toward the well, toward the graves.

The wind found the last body. The one left unburied, unhonored. It was sprawled out in the path of the wind, reaching out to two graves near one another; one smaller than the other, both marked only by a collection of stones.

Student Name: Damilola Melony Dosunmu-Afolayan

Grade: 9

School: Klein Collins High School

Title: We Remember

Category: Poetry

Key: Silver Key

Educator:

I can still feel his hand resting on my behind

The other boy's hand resting between my thighs; he was not very kind.

Every day, I feel an itch where the third boy wrapped his hands around my waist.

Every Thursday, I remember where that old man gave a chase.

I still think about that geezer at Walmart who stared down my top.

I remember my brother who laughed at the girl's tears; he didn't stop.

I still recall my cousin who said, "We aren't that related..."

I still think about that coach. Lord, I bet by now he'd be jaded.

I remember these men, these boys, these Crusaders.

I remember them all and pray I forget them all sometime later.

Student Name: Amelia Richardson  
Grade: 8  
School: Krimmel Intermediate School  
Title: White Roses Turn Red  
Category: Personal Essay & Memoir  
Key: Silver Key  
Educator: Lisa Liessmann

Red roses have always been my favorite flower; the way the petals form a dome around its inner soul and the way the thorns give the rose security has always appealed to me in a way that is indescribable. The thorns of a rose allow it to feel safe in its ability to harm others, by puncturing the enemy's skin. It allows the rose to conceal itself from the outside world.

I associate myself with the rose. I connect to the way it has its outer dome to hide its thoughts and personality from the world. I relate to its form of protecting itself; pushing others out with thorns as a method of not letting anyone in. And I empathize with the way its petals can be a combination of bright and deep red, because those are the colors I find the uttermost comfort in.

The rose and I appear to be leading on paths that are parallel, yet I have seemed to drift into the curb. My world stops as I allow the thorns to inflict suffering upon myself. The identical rosy red emerges from my arms and hips as it floods to the bathroom floor like a thrashing river that could continue on for eternity. My mind's capability to function is brought to a halt as if I'm a phone being deprived of a charger, yet the adrenaline allows my heart to keep beating at an ungodly rate; strangely, I feel more alive.

The numbness resides, but comes back stronger than ocean waves during high tide. The thorns piercing through my body isn't giving me the satisfaction I hoped for. I tumble into the thorns once more, which seem to be a comforting friend in the harsh face of suffering. You'll be less numb, I tell myself. You'll feel something, anything. You deserve the pain. You deserve to feel like this. These thoughts linger in my brain. The seesaw in my mind rocking back and forth between numbness and self-hate starts to bring me to an end. The petals of my rose being torn off one by one as my recurring thoughts penetrate fractures into my mind like an unbearable headache that won't conclude. I want to stop, but the pain is addictive and only gets easier to withstand. Maybe next time I'll let the rosebud perish, not just a few petals, then I won't have to withstand anything.

I awaken in an unwelcoming state of perplexity; my brain is as clear as walking through a cold morning fog. My movements are sluggish as I depart from my bedside. The mirror I stand before reveals my drowsy expression and the extensive, jagged wounds that rest above my old scars. My lack of energy and my feeling of loneliness puts an ache in my

stomach. I'm still drowning in the numbness I have grown accustomed to, yet I begin to crave something more; something beyond pain. I don't have a clear representation of my mood before I met the red rose; I was different then.

My rose used to be white, but the red has consumed my body causing the white to drain itself out leaving only the cuts and scars of my past choices that are yet to be resolved. The red seeps into my inner soul, as I bury myself, my personality deeper and deeper within, until the red outer dome of my mind becomes my entirety; all my petals have turned red.

Red. Red is the color I'm supposed to find the most comfort in, yet lately it has been bringing me only misery. Is this what I want? to feel lonely and unenergized? The thorns give me the satisfaction of pain and relief, but right now I just desire the same peace that clouds experience while they drift calmly across the sky. Is red truly the color I find the most security in?

A game of soul-searching is what leads me to the acknowledgment of wanting to get better. My rose is bare; there's nothing left to hide me. My visit to the counselor's office, the notification to my parents, and the resentment my mother holds against me strengthens the want to throw myself back to the thorns. Though I wouldn't bother to pull myself out of their grasp this time. My anger and sorrow is consuming me, yet I have nowhere left to harm; I have torn myself apart in every aspect possible. My rose is unrecognizable; the stem is wilted, and the petals are extinct. My options are now limited to the act of death or healing. Although death feels like the simplest, most permanent option, over time my rose gets watered by the support of close friends, and my roots become grounded by my determination to live. The stem of my rose starts to become upright, but where my petals have gone is still a mystery. I can only hope that they'll return, and if they do, I hope they'll grow to be a pale, frosty white; the same White they once were.

Student Name: Kaitlyn Davis  
Grade: 8  
School: Kleb Intermediate School  
Title: Why Abortion Should Be Legal  
Category: Critical Essay  
Key: Silver Key  
Educator: eric cloning

Have you ever had an abortion; probably not. That would be because it's illegal in most states and countries, or you're just male. Should abortion be illegal? That is the question, isn't it? Well, many people have their own opinion. Some people think abortion is a horrific thing, killing something that hasn't even been born. That's not what I'm here to talk about. I'm here to explain to you why it should be legal. My reasons are rape, incest, overpopulation, women's reproductive rights.

Let's start with reason number one. People have been getting raped for many years, and though we don't want it to happen, many years to come as well. 1 out of every 6 American women has been the victim of an attempted or completed rape in her lifetime. I don't know about you, but if some random stranger walking down the same street as me picked me up and locked me in a basement to rape me. Which then led to me getting pregnant; I would abort the hell out of that thing!

Something worse than a stranger raping you would be a family member raping you. Most people don't want to think about it because they believe their whole family is perfect, but their family can turn out just like the song, "I'm My Own Grandpa." by Willie Nelson. Do you want a mutated child that your dad, uncle, grandpa, cousin, or brother helped you conceive? Unless you're from Alabama, I don't think you do.

Some people say, "Abortion is too extreme you should just put the kid up for adoption." I'm not saying orphanages are a terrible idea. I'm saying not everyone wants to live in a world that contains the kid from a mistake or a terrible thing that happened.

People shouldn't make decisions for other people.

Abortion itself isn't hurting the world's population. We still have 7.888 billion people on this Earth. About 385,000 babies are born a day and only about 150,000 people die each day. The world's population increases each day by 235,000 people.

By the years 2050-2100, scientists estimate that the world will be overpopulated. Many scientists seem to think that the Earth will only be able to support 9-10 billion people. 28 years from now the estimated population would be 10,447,011,447. Although abortion can be considered heartless and wrong, it is one thing that would help with population control. When we have nothing to help with population control the world will eventually overpopulate.

People talk about how certain personal rights are being violated, but a lot of people think women shouldn't have an opinion on whether or not they go through with a pregnancy. This is called women's reproductive rights. These rights argue that women have the right to make their own decisions about their bodies, including the choice to abort a fetus. By making abortion illegal they are taking these women's rights away. If taking women's reproductive rights away is fine then why can't we take African American's rights away too?

As a result, abortion should be legal because of rape, incest, overpopulation, and women's reproductive rights. So let's look back to the question from earlier. Should abortion be illegal? Do you have your answer?

The world would be better if people respected people's choices.

Student Name: Alessandra Alcaraz

Grade: 12

School: Klein High School

Title: Why I Can't Let It Go

Category: Poetry

Key: Silver Key

Educator:

Almost four years since the sunniest but cloudiest day.  
Every day something from that day comes to haunt me,  
though every day they leave my mind  
until they're ready to take flight again.  
But there is one thing I can never leave my sight off,  
the one thing I don't understand is why I can't let it go.  
With its color fading into a plain brow,  
and coming apart with its loose, scrawny threads,  
I find myself clinging to it.  
Maybe it's because it held you one last time,  
when I wished for once to hold you,  
as your heart was slipping from mine.  
Maybe it's because it provided you warmth  
instead of its usual cold touch,  
the cold touch that always brought me comfort.  
maybe it's because it was there whispering my love,  
Giving it to you while I couldn't.  
Reminding you it will never go away.  
Maybe it's because it was what you first held me in,  
never letting me go, even when you had to,  
just like I had to do with you.

Maybe that's why I can't let it go.

Student Name: Rebecca Beery  
Grade: 8  
School: Krimmel Intermediate School  
Title: World of Music  
Category: Flash Fiction  
Key: Silver Key  
Educator: Lisa Liessmann

Before my father could get his body through the door, my mother is at his throat. I can hear their argument through the thin drywall between us.

"This is the third night this week!" I hear my mother say. I can tell she's trying not to yell.

"I told you I would have to work late tonight," My Father said.

"No you didn't"

"Yes, I did."

"No, you DIDN'T!"

I need to escape them. I ran past the living room with our old, cracked TV, past the kitchen, with broken plates and glasses, and past my memories. My memories of playing with dolls and building blocks, of being oblivious and happy. Now those memories have morphed into fuzzy dreams, worlds away. I reached my bedroom at the end of the hall. I went through the door and grabbed my phone and my headphones and scurried over to my closet door. I buried myself in the old clothes and blankets in the corner. I felt safe. Warm. I plugged in my headphones, and the sound of my parents' argument faded away as music swirled through my mind.

The gears of my imagination started turning, and my tiny closet began to melt and twist around me as the lyrics "Look into the lake, shimmering like smoke, rises the moon," started playing. Soon my mind had turned my dark closet into the night sky scattered with stars, and the blankets around me had turned to a wide grassy field, there was a big bright moon, shining into a lake. The slow, calm music was floating around me. Finally, peace.

I walked toward the lake, the smooth water like glass, the moon's reflection trapped underneath. The smooth water was disturbed by a flower, into the lake by the breeze. I lowered my hands and picked it up. As I placed it in my pocket, the song changed, and the expansive field narrowed into a chair. I was on an airplane, "Drinking champagne a mile in the sky" rang in my ear. A flute of bubbly champagne and a napkin appeared on my tray table.. I looked out the window and saw a big city beneath me. The tall building

looked so small from the air. Somewhere down there, my screaming parents don't even know I'm gone. I looked away from the window and saw the little napkin. I folded it up into a little paper crane.

When I looked up, I was still in a chair, but it wasn't the chair of an airplane. I looked out the now large window to see the grassy ground and railroad tracks zooming by. "He took the midnight train goin' anywhere" rang. I was on a train, and I was still holding my paper crane. The wind of the open window scooped it outside. Dang It! I stuck my head out to see how far it had gone, and a branch grazed the side of my head. I pulled a twig out of my hair and placed it in my pocket. The crane was caught on the window behind me. I reached my arm out to grab it, but it was too far. Just a little farther... I stuck more of my body out the window. First my shoulders, then my chest, and soon enough my legs were the only part of me still in the train. I looked down, and the train was on a bridge. The river underneath, fierce and violent, crashed against the rocks. I stretched a little more, and as I grasped the crane in my hands, I felt myself fall from the window, plummeting towards the water. This is it. I'm going to die right here, I thought, but as I was falling, I heard the lyrics "your hug is like a warm pool," and instead of hitting the river, I slid into warm, calm water.

I looked around and saw I was in a backyard pool, and my paper crane was floating in the middle of it. The calmness in the backyard was such a pleasant change from the tense rushing of the train and river. I carefully scooped up my soggy paper crane and tucked it away in my pocket. Fireflies zipped around in the cool air and the singing of crickets echoed through the night. I got out of the pool, yet I was dry.

I started to walk through the grass when I stepped on something. What the- It was a small rock with stripes of color in it. It was smooth and almost perfectly circular. I picked it up and rolled it around in my hand. I placed it in my pocket along with the other things I collected. I walked through the grass, the cool dew felt good on my feet. I walked to the gate in the fence and kept on walking through vacuously. I walked out in front of the house and into the street, illuminated only by streetlamps and the bright glow of the moon. I walked down the street, looking at the houses, and cars. I felt the warm concrete under my feet, and the slight breeze on my skin. I kept wandering mindlessly down the street as the sun was slowly beginning to come up. The music that had been playing in the background of my adventures finally stopped, and the night sky and neighborhood had condensed into my closet. The glow of the sun was the open door, and my mother reaching out a hand.

"Honey what are you doing in there?" she said with a sweetness I hadn't heard come from her in a while. "Come out, it's about time for bed." She walked back out to the living room, leaving me sitting on the ground by myself again. As I stood up and walked out of the closet, I felt an odd weight in my pocket. I reached my hand in and pulled out a flower, a paper crane, a twig, and a little striped stone.

Student Name: Jorja Beall

Grade: 10

School: La Porte High School

Title: My mother; my father; me

Category: Poetry

Key: Silver Key

Educator:

My mother, my father, me

I hate when I yell.

I hate when I scream.

I hate when all I feel is angry.

I hate balling up my fists

when things don't go my way

I hate taking jagged breaths

I hate when I'm so angry

that I don't know what to say.

I don't know who's voice it is when I scream

Is it my mother, my father, or me?

I slammed the front door last week

I knocked a picture frame

It was like something new came over me

The same thing that turns my mother

Into the other

The part of her that bites, kicks, screams

The part of her the doctors say is "bipolar"

I never wanted her to scream.

All I wanted was mommy.

Now I throw and slam and scream til my face is green

And I wonder

Is it my mother, my father, or me?

I hate having the urge to throw something

I hate when I want to punch

I hate when I hate so much

I hate when I hate to love people so dear

it's like I hate everything.

I hate when I work to not think, but run out of breath

I hate when I start to scream and don't know the voice coming out of me

Is it my mother, my father, or me?

There is a boy

And things are not well, I am angry at him

I am angry because he is happy

But knows I'm sad

he knows he made me sad

He knows I'm angry

And opens his arms

but they are not mine to be in.

I tell my friends I hate him

while I ask him how his day was

And remember my father, as a kid

Who hated everyone who hated him

No matter what they did

Is the hate I feel

My mother, my father, or me?

Student Name: Ava Newlin  
Grade: 12  
School: George Ranch High School  
Title: Cicadas  
Category: Poetry  
Key: Silver Key  
Educator:

Cicadas

After Li-Young Lee's "From Blossoms"

From the doorstep,  
we heard the scream of cicadas,  
or tiny men paying homage to the fading night  
surrounding a grave titled  
Welcome.

From forgotten lines, from stumbled prayers,  
from bugs like angels,  
comes the death of  
a seventeen-year-old giant,  
a giant crushed by a foot.

Is there something to mourn here too?  
is this what they mean by 'hallowed ground,'  
is this the time to get on my knees, please, I want to pray,  
I want to pay reverence, I want to adore what is left,  
I want to call myself holy.

Consider acceptance -

Consider, that this could mean

slipping out the back door; from foot

to foot to foot, from inhale to exhale,

from silence to silence to

dormant silence, to passive dormant silence.

Student Name: Rania Lodhi  
Grade: 12  
School: George Ranch High School  
Title: Federal-Crime  
Category: Novel Writing  
Key: Silver Key  
Educator:

"Hey, Cookie." Callahan said. His footsteps were silent; they always were.

Kade was sitting on the edge of the roof, staring up at the stars. The time was somewhere around three in the morning - he shouldn't have been awake. "Don't you think I'm a little old for that name?" He asked, his gaze remaining transfixed to the sky.

Callahan thought for a minute, a series of groans and grunts escaping him, "Mmm...nah."

Callahan was the technology expert, the team's quote on quote, guy in chair - whatever that meant. He sat down next to Kade and ruffled the younger boy's hair. "You're just a little, itty-bitty, baby!" Callahan exclaimed, a small laughter escaping him.

"I'm nineteen." Kade said, unamused.

"You're still the baby."

"I know, but seriously..." Kade sighed, "Why can't you just call me Hotchner like a normal person?"

Callahan grinned, "Cookie, the last thing I am is normal. Same goes for you."

Silence followed that, but it was short-lived.

Callahan - though hesitant at first - spoke up again. "Hey," he began, "what happened today wasn't your fault."

Kade took a deep breath; it was shaky. He was shaking. "Does it even matter?" he asked, his voice hoarse. "That little girl is dead. I was too slow. At the end of the day, those are the facts...I was too slow."

Callahan pulled him into a side hug. Kade fought it at first, but eventually, he gave in. "Cookie," Callahan started, his voice soft, "you weren't too slow. You saved all those other kids; you just ran out of time. Also, it definitely is not your fault that the bomber took a class of first-graders as hostages to begin with. Even the worst of them don't usually stoop that low. Nobody was expecting it."

"She wasn't even supposed to be there, Cal. She was only there because she was trying to save her sister! She did something most adults wouldn't, and she..." Kade trailed off, his voice quivering, "she suffered for it. It's my fault she didn't make it out. It's my fault she- ow!" he exclaimed, finally shifting his gaze from the stars above and to Callahan instead. "Hey! You said you'd stop hitting me in the head!"

"I said I'd stop if you stopped saying stupid stuff," Callahan jeered. "And you blaming yourself for the actions of a bomber is probably the stupidest thing yet." He sighed, "Listen, Cookie. You're nineteen. You're barely even a legal adult. You shouldn't even be here! If there's one thing Laurens is right about, it's that you should be in college somewhere. You should be going to parties, getting wasted, and learning things the hard way like life intended. And I get you're learning a lot of things like that, yeah, but not the things you should be. Not yet, at least. And you're definitely way too young to be carrying the guilt of something like this; you're just a kid. O'Mally feels awful for sending you in there, y'know."

"He shouldn't. It's not-" Kade attempted to speak, but Callahan cut him off.

"You're right. It's not his fault, just like how it isn't yours."

Kade was silent for a moment, staring at Callahan before sighing once more. "You're the worst, Cal."

"I know I am, Cookie." Callahan replied, practically cackling. He punched Kade's shoulder, causing him to wince in pain. "Oh! Oh, don't tell me, is your tattoo still sore?"

Right, his tattoo. This was his sixth feather. A feather honoring the sixth life he hadn't been able to save.

"Yes, Cal. Yes it is." Kade replied, but once the initial pain subsided, he had started to laugh as well.

Kade liked everyone in his team, but there was something about Callahan that made him feel like maybe, just maybe, he'd be okay.

Student Name: Ziyuan Lu

Grade: 12

School: Glenda Dawson High School

Title: A Modern Proposal for the Betterment of the Patriotic Public; in Pursuit of the American Dream through National Efforts to Increase Environmental Awareness and Equal Access to all Resources.

Category: Humor

Key: Silver Key

Educator:

Chloroprene, benzene, toluene, xylene and formaldehyde – these concentrate in "disposable" communities and bring about disease and destitution in its inhabitants. The air is stuffy. The river runs rancid. The very soil that everything is built upon – it too is toxic. Such is a normal day for the people living – scraping by – in Louisiana's Cancer Alley. With each careless toss of an old battery and each drive to the store two blocks away comes the accumulation of harsh chemicals that poison the lives of lower-income and colored neighborhoods.

This disproportionate exposure to pollution that disposable communities experience is unfair; they are the scapegoats of America: a land of freedom, liberty, and equality. To restore this great country to its proclaimed glory, where it can truly boast of such virtues, disposable communities should weaponize the waste they receive and use it to terrorize wealthier neighborhoods, reducing the amount of pollution in their communities and balancing the distribution of such pollutants across America. This multi-faceted approach addresses all areas of concern, from general welfare to education accessibility.

Firstly, nothing will be wasted, as all undesired materials will be reused, reducing demand for the limited supply of natural resources needed for terrorism.

Secondly, ejecting toxic materials out of disposable communities will improve their environment while avenging them by giving the rich a taste of their own medicine.

Thirdly, terrorizing wealthier communities will force them to shoulder the burden of pollution, reducing environmental disparity. Mending the gap between the wealthy and the poor will help citizens realize the American dream of equality and promote national unity.

Fourthly, equality can be furthered by offering local high school students hands-on experience in building toxic weapons, teaching future generations valuable STEM skills in preparation for times of war that will surely come, and enhancing educational enrichment where it is needed most.

Fifthly, violent and extreme conflict between wealthy and disposable communities will reduce overpopulation. Leaving only the strongest to survive, the nation will take yet another step in evolution.

Sixthly, the destruction of these wealthier neighborhoods will leave more land available, leading to an influx of real estate; inhabitants of disposable communities can then acquire enough space to live comfortably.

I can think of no one objection that will possibly be raised against this proposal unless it should be urged that terrorism will spark a civil war that divides the country. This I freely own, and it was indeed one principal design in offering it to America. Therefore, let no man talk to me of other expedients: implementing regulations limiting the waste a neighborhood may produce, holding excessive polluters accountable regardless of their wealth, pursuing sustainable practices in place of harmful ones, promoting community efforts to help struggling neighbors, providing needy communities with resources necessary to improve quality of life, raising awareness to garner support for an environmental justice movement. Lastly, inciting widespread sentiment to set aside destructive desires and make environmentally conscious decisions reduce pollution in general, including that of disposable communities. Therefore, I repeat, let no man talk to me of these and the like expedients, until he sees what this proposal will make of his country. The shared trauma, the shared lifestyles, the shared environment across the country emerge from America's glorious era of terrorism and become apparent to a once divided nation.

Communities that are currently deemed "disposable" may become free of this derogatory title with the help of loyal Americans. Only by terrorizing the wealthy with their misplaced trash will the country be able to make any progress toward the fabled environment and national ideals. Unfortunately, I profess that I am unable to participate due to my status as a foreigner; I am not an American citizen. Thus, I cannot contribute to America's cause in these patriotic acts of terrorism, but I will continue supporting Americans who take waste and fate into their own hands by bombing wealthy litterbugs.

Student Name: Zipporah Ramirez  
Grade: 10  
School: Robert Turner Colege-Career High School  
Title: In the end  
Category: Poetry  
Key: Silver Key  
Educator:

In the end my life will not be worth much in the grand  
scheme of the world,  
my name will not go down in history books,  
the things I will write will not enter many discussions  
after I have left them,  
but with you,  
my life is worth everything.

The days we share together of young and old love will be  
written in my journals many times over,  
the small memories of meaningless tasks,  
of basic chores,  
will be worth something because I'm with you.

There's a undoubtful sense of me that you give me,  
that even on our wedding day,  
my face could be white with extravagant black eyeliner with  
a pointy black lip,  
I could see no less love in your eyes then the first time I  
felt them on me.

And if the time ever comes,  
when old photos don't look like us anymore,  
when our parents pass,  
when we are no longer in the shape we were sixty years ago,  
and I sit you down for maybe the last time in our chairs,  
and talk about what will happen when I pass.

It will be sad,  
but in the end, it means I spent,  
a life worth something,  
With you sweetheart.

Student Name: Julia Barber  
Grade: 11  
School: Pearland High School  
Title: Night  
Category: Flash Fiction  
Key: Silver Key  
Educator: Sam JOWERS

The sun lays against the horizon, a settling warmth passing over the clearing it draped across. Its honey gold light mourned and weeped the further it was dragged below, depressed by the insignificant idea of bidding this world a farewell, despite the fact that soon it would return. A chilling breeze whistled, skipping across leafy blades that swayed and bowed, spinning through long, quivering branches that knocked against one another as they were disturbed, continuing beyond the canopy of old trees. Shadows stir restlessly, clambering up the rough, winding bark that makes up this enchanting forest.

The hush of waves sings from somewhere beyond, chanting delicately weaved stories of salty water lapping at pristine sand. The beach, whimsical and alive with magic, can only survive in the hollow of a mind untouched, as its glimmering shore was ducked below the wide, flat leaves, hidden expertly from view. But its gentle melody was enough to prove its shallow existence, steadily overlapping into a thunderous roar as the night progressed, rumbling in the ears of each skittering creature, swallowing the careful night whole, stripping it down to quivering bones.

Sun fully seated in its place beyond this simple reality, the moon awakens, shy and bashful as its full light fills the blade-sharp void. It doesn't present as strong as the sun, but yet shines anyway. The moon has only caught the barest of glimpses of the all-empowering star, taking in her elegant, caring touch as she dipped far below the sea. It knew that someday they would meet, in an extravagant show of light and dark, a balance that could only be dreamed of on the most still of days.

Though, for now, the moon was at peace with their yawning distance, for the two would only meet when both were finally ready. The stars that flickered against the ink blotted sky, infinite and never ending, burned with encouragement, patient for that fateful time. They'd awaited for thousands of years, seasons overlapping the further time crawled, intricate and slow. A couple more would do them no harm. But the dimmest of them, old and faded, born before the birth of the moon, understood that day would result in the

demise of this tender planet. The moon, for all it admired the sun, did not realize the magnitude of her power.

The moon didn't have as many friends as the sun, creatures whose step was as weightless as her precious light, fast asleep in nests and burrows. Their fur and scales rising and falling to the beat of a tired heart, skin tingling softly with the memory of warm sunshine, hidden deep within the nooks and crannies that hid from any sort of wandering, predacious eyes. Should these buried spots prove accurate, then none of these oblivious critters would be feasted upon this weary night.

But alas, eyes that stretch as wide as her moon sharpen against the creeping darkness, pinning the frail, uncovered body of an unaware mouse. Wings, the shade of the bark, furl down in a rapid descent, outstretched talons shimmering with obsidian, a screech that slices the air in two. The call of victory- and the shriek of death. Claws scabble for purchase as they strike. Predators, who'd been previously stalking, hang their heads with empty bellies, as their prey scurries in beat with the warning. Hunting was a test of speed.

Free of the dangers, fireflies wake, dancing to the jaunty tune sung by frogs camouflaged against the forest. They ribbit and croak in a harmonizing lull that follows the rustling wind, calming the free spirits of the forest. They flicker an amber light, reflecting in the beady eyes of curious animals that momentarily lift their heads.

Grass rises from the dirt, brave and strong, despite being trampled over by an assortment of diverse feet; Paws, hooves, claws, everything the sheltering trees hold. These soldiers aren't always pretty to look at, even when they bow against the wind, a simple green color only good for hiding bugs. Flowers of all shapes and colors are praised, however, for they add a joyous mood to the forest with their dazzling petals. But now they shrivel closed, unwilling to rise against the challenge of crowds, stems weak and tired. They will be reborn again through scattered seeds, children cursed to the same fate.

Above, leaves mock and taunt, free from the struggles of being walked over. They do not remember, however, that their ancestors had once colored the floor in a wondrous mess of reds, oranges, and yellows. No. They chatter in ignorant bliss, even as leafroller moths crawl over flat surfaces and eat them down to the stem. Their holder, a great oak, doesn't add any comments, still and silent. It doesn't gibe or sneer, but nor does it welcome and cherish. Creatures come and go in whatever space it provides, but none stay long.

A deafening howl forces the babbling leaves as silent as a wish. The clouds part, as though affected by the reverberating blare. The moon grins down joyously at the clearer view, thankful to the tumbling winds, even as fog smoothly rolls in, spilling across the scenery in a shallow mist, thick clouds stretched over the emerald grass, weaving around sturdy trunks and tangled roots. It weeps in a cold shower, guilty for covering the carefully preserved earth. It does not understand that certain creatures appreciated the odd shelter. Doesn't understand that it helps hide those who do not wish to be seen.

Gradually, the sky discards the oily black and dawns a pretty shade of blooming pink. Clouds, massive and wise, are painted in an assortment of violets and blues. As the first ray of the sun trembles over the distant sea, a golden hue replaces the waking color, warm and kind. The waves crashing against the shore in a violent batter of sounds relaxed, reverting to a pulling hum that lulls the creatures still running free in their dreams back into the present.

Student Name: Jessica Fernandez  
Grade: 11  
School: Robert Turner Colege-Career High School  
Title: The Witch  
Category: Poetry  
Key: Silver Key  
Educator:

I sit on the edge of a splintered house in a forest of nothingness  
With a murky pond that sits in the middle of sunken grounds.  
I whisper incantations with narrowed eyes and sharpened teeth.  
I am annoyingly petty and volatile,  
Holding grudges tighter than a mother holds her baby.  
I am a dead sea full of thoughts that were never said,  
And a desolate mangle of empty promises made  
Callously to a kid who was doomed from the start.  
I am my mother's child and my father's daughter  
I am a mass of words that are screamed  
In a dead language, unheard yet horribly loud  
I see visions of a life just out of reach  
I chase after it like a dog chasing after its owner  
I am an ache felt in hollow bones, always wanting  
Always dreaming, never having and despite  
My rotted heart, clumsy hands, and tongue of acid  
I still dream of that world beyond the edges of my fraying house  
With the murky pond I stare into for days on end  
Hoping to change the reflections, yet  
All I see is a little girl staring back at me  
With eyes too harsh and teeth too sharp

Or maybe all she sees is me

Student Name: Michelle Gu  
Grade: 10  
School: Glenda Dawson High School  
Title: The Write Way Out  
Category: Science Fiction & Fantasy  
Key: Silver Key  
Educator:

Tina slaps herself awake. Three in the morning, and she had only managed a single paragraph. Mr. Hong, a man of little hair and patience, will eye the blank page once before slicing their contract with the thick, long nail of his thumb. She despises him, yet she knows that without him, she has nothing but her grandpa's musty typewriter and mountains of debt. A meow echoes from Tina's lap. Viri! That's right. Her precious princess will always support her.

She steadies her fingers against the keys, easing into sleep as she punches one last sentence:

Mathilde hunched over her desk, coal pinched between her fingers, and began to scrape.

No lowercase letters found their way onto Mathilde's potato-infused burlap. She meant no aggression; she just never learned how to write lowercase letters. Her father was imprisoned for smuggling drugs in vegetable sacks, and now, she sat all alone in a ramshackle hut.

She wondered about her mother's whereabouts. Mathilde, though uneducated, understood the concept of family through her observations of hatched ducklings following their mother's lead. Yet, any mental grasp for her mother left her head frustratingly empty.

FATHER, I AM VERY DISAPOINTED IN YOU. YOU LEAV ME ALONE, WITH NOTHING BUT POTATOS TO EAT. I WANT SOMETHING FULFILING FOR ONCE.

The moment Mathilde concluded her sentence, a puff of inky smoke arose before her. Her jaw dropped as she watched the smoke steadily dissipate. A rich stew, sprinkled with buttered beef and cheese. This couldn't be! Was she a sorceress? Maybe her mom was— Her stomach growled. As she reached for the stew, a streak of black and green whizzed across her room. A cat! She shooed it away, eager to indulge in her dinner.

Tina snarfs down her oatmeal. She's late. Mr. Hong never waits for anyone. Now for the page. She scrambles to her desk, tearing paper from her typewriter. Wait a damn second... Did she write this unknowingly? A full page of words lies in place of her sloppy prologue. She glances at Viri inquisitively. His dark fur conceals his eyes. Ha! What was she thinking... Even surviving Mr. Harris' wrath is more possible than a confiding cat.

In the coming days, Mathilde wrote on every surface. LETTHESE BARELS BURST on the planks of barrels at the local pub, whose owner robbed drunk customers. MAYYOR SILK ITCH ITS WEARERS on the faux silk of a fraudulent vendor. As long as she wrote anything on anything, the words would become reality, and her excitement led her to confronting her father.

FATHER. MY MOTHER, OR YOUR WIFE, IS A SORSERES.

Mathilde shrieked, releasing her coal as the floor crumbled beneath her. In hasty confidence, she had written her suspicions without realizing the aftermath. This was nothing like the stew, the barrels, the silk. The smoke loomed above her like a warning. Heat crackled the air. Neighbors hollered. Rats scurried. The roof collapsed.

The fumes embraced a figure. Though this woman donned a peasant's attire of loose, starched cotton, her face writhed with pure malice.

Tina gapes at the typewriter. In the span of minutes, it sputtered out a chapter of words. As she waits for her grandpa to pick up her call, she skims the story. Huh.

Why is her protagonist, Mathilde, so rebellious? And her mom was never relevant to the story anyway; most authors never mention the second parent. Why is Mathilde writing stuff, and for the love of God, what does all this smoke mean? Tina detests ambiguity. Her intended plot is simple: A plain girl with a miserable past, who finds strength in baking for the village. At the climax, a beast will attack, but Mathilde will save the day with her pastries.

As Tina reads the last sentence, her grandpa's voice crackles from her phone. She ignores him. The machine sputters, releasing threads of smoke. Viri hisses.

Mathilde peered up to... her mother.

"Vanity is my favorite sin, my little wart. Actually, I would say... second favorite. Wrath always comes first."

Within five minutes, her mother had slaughtered the local farmer's cattle, transforming the corpse into leather heels. She also used the blood to paint her lips a deep crimson.

Mathilde, though nervous, admired her mother's confidence over her father's spinelessness.

"No one is perfect, my sweet toad. With me, you can be happy again." Mathilde's mother snapped her fingers and disappeared, reappearing seconds later with a bag of sweets.

"There is one key difference between me and your father, my spiderling. I care for you and will go by any means to do so."

A sharp pain pierced Mathilde's chest.

Her mother noticed the debris embedded in her daughter.

"Oh, dearest. You know I had to make a grandiose entrance. I'll make it up. Uppity-up."

Her mother clapped. Pain bloomed in Mathilde, who watched in horror as her wounds sealed, forcing the blood inwards as the skin knitted together. To this woman, her pain meant nothing.

Tina groans into the phone. "Writing? You don't understand, grandpa. Writing is my job. I don't even like it... I can't think of any ideas lately, I'm such a mess... I'm asking about the typewriter you gave me... That's what I'm saying, it's acting strange. Like it's typing out stuff I never wrote!... God. You won't believe what happened."

Tina exclaims how she finally met her boss's deadline, thanks to the mysterious force generating her a story. Her cat meows repeatedly, bouncing on her bed.

"No, grandpa, that's my cat! He sneaked into my house, and he kind of lives with me now... Anyways, about that typewriter... You believe me?"

The moment Tina's grandpa replies "magic," Viri pounces off the bed towards Tina's face.

Mathilde lunged for her desk, or what remained of it. If she brought this devilish "mother" into existence, perhaps she could do something to end her. She just needed the coal, and anything to write on.

"Tina? Hello? Honey, are you there?"

Tina ignores her grandpa. She gapes at the empty space where Viri had suspended in midair. He disappeared! She could almost feel his claws scrape her face. The air reeked of smoke.

Mathilde halted. Would writing away her mother's existence be... murder? Her mother was considerably, well, a real person... right? Mathilde would be worse than her father.

But the foundation of her mother's sweetness was dishonesty. No, she was a thief, liar, a witch. Who knew the possibilities of her sorcery? There would be no hesitation, no mercy—

Icy fingers wrapped around Mathilde's throat. Her mother tightened her grip, holding her up like a prized kill.

"Oh, my little fox. I don't think so."

Tina shrieks as her cat reappears from thin air, crashing onto the bed. His claws drip with blood.

Mathilde stares dumbly at her mother, whose once symmetrical face flaunted a triad of oozing scratches. A black cat had appeared from thin air, saving Mathilde's life.

Her mother steadied herself up, sweetening her expression.

"Mathilde, dear, your impish plots end here. I am your mother." Her words were unencumbered by the blood. "And I order you to never write to your father again, understand? Remember, without me, you have no one. So choose wisely."

Mathilde spent months obeying her mother, from toenail painting to gray-hair plucking. Yet something felt strange. Her mother would say things, awful things, yet pretend she forgot them. Mathilde knew her mother was sharper than a thorn. Perhaps the magic tired her. But whenever she feigned forgetfulness, Mathilde would notice a peculiar glint in her eye, which always disappeared like a flame in the wind.

Mathilde, though mistreated by her father, never once doubted herself. She recognized his incompetence, so she never took his words to heart. Her mother, however, forced her to bow down to any speech, no matter how crudely condescending. Every night, on the cusp of her dreams— or rather, nightmares— Mathilde dreaded tomorrow, whittled by confusion. She always wished to escape. Guilt followed.

Her mother had blasted the burlap containing the message to her father. Mathilde missed him.

Tina's excellence in English class defined her childhood. Not only did she befriend each of her English teachers, they also offered her suggestions for writing contests and praised her endlessly. But like a moth drawn to a candle, her passion was short-lived; As essays piled up, and pressures to create inflated, she found writing repulsive—

Her grandpa continues. "Tina, you must listen to me. That typewriter has otherworldly powers. It has the ability to bring what you write to life."

"Grandpa, this isn't time for one of your stories—"

"I'm being serious, honey. Your conscious characters, whoever they are, continue the plot... but if the typewriter's left unchecked, the dangers of the fictional world can merge with our reality. Villains and all. Quick, tell me what it's producing."

Right after her grandpa's finishes, smoke sings Tina's nostrils. Baffled, she snatches a mug and dumps her coffee onto the typewriter. The machine hisses. The smoke alleviates. Horror slithers down her spine as she spots the mass of papers on her desk, burnt at the edges. Magic.

She snatches the most recent page, finding the last sentence.

Mathilde, nauseous with fright, ventured to the local prison.

Mathilde squinted at the rusty bars. Behind them, a man rustled on a cot, reeking of rat dung. A long, crusted beard dragged down his expression. His yellowed eyes scrutinized the visitor. He opened his mouth, revealing rotten teeth.

"And who are you? Some little girl tryin' to do good deed, eh? I don' blame ya, but I ain't worth savin'. Leave. Go play."

Mathilde's eyes burned. Her father, drunken to a state of disremembrance. His own daughter, a stranger.

"I wish to know more about... your wife."

Thoughts swam in Mathilde's head. Did her creation of a new mother kill her original mother? Did she even have a mother in the first place? She needed to know.

Her father chortled.

"Don't expect me to remember anythin,' little girl."

Tina positions her fingers on the typewriter's coffee-coated keys. Finally, after years of living in a haze, she found writing exciting. First, she had unsuccessfully tried to kill off Mathilde's mom. The magic involved in the mother's creation overpowered the typewriter and the writer herself, but Tina knows what she can do now. The dad also poses a threat, and unlike the mom, Tina created him. She just needed to test this out:

Sick from his alcohol addiction, Mathilde's father dies in prison.

Mathilde shrieked as her father's eyes rolled back, his bones rattling into the cinderblock wall. Seconds later, his skin had paled to a sickening pastel.

Mathilde cried, "Medic! Anyone there?"

In the following silence, Mathilde's chest throbbed. In her entire life, she had never seen her father so still. Though his health was already wavering, it felt unnatural. Almost supernatural.

Tina squares her shoulders proudly. Simple as that. The dad is gone. Now, she needs to find a way to aid her character. In a state of giddiness, Tina types:

Mathilde, scrambling out of the prison, stumbled upon an old man amidst a storm. His hands were clasped together, yet they radiated an ominous viridian.

"And who might you be?" Mathilde shrieked. The man smirked.

"Little girl, a great danger pervades this town. Only you can stop her."

Mathilde gasped, knowing exactly of whom the man spoke.

"But, she's my mother! I can't— And I have no means to—"

"I know. She terrorized our schools, burning papers, pens. But her mind is limited. Little does she know, you don't need the burlap. Writing is powerful. It bestows you as the creator. You can save lives, even transcend worlds... Anyhow, you must hurry. Take this."

The man extracted a vial from his palms, glowing green.

"Mathilde, our town's beloved savior. Drink this only when you find yourself in the highest mortal danger. After all, you matter most as the main character."

Main character? Before she could ask, he vanished in a crack of smoke. The vial plummeted to the dirt.

Tina smiles tartly, the phone slipping down her hand. "Oh, Mr. Hong, You're too kind. You're buying dinner for us both? And you want to visit my apartment? Oh, wonderful! I'll see you tomorrow!"

After hanging up, she slams her phone into her bed. It ricochets off the mattress and into the cheap wall, which crumbles on impact.

"Dammit, what am I gonna do! I'm nowhere close to finishing the stupid book!... Just when I thought everything was... Hey, where did she go?"

Viri has disappeared. The only trace of her on the dusty carpet: a trail of paw prints, stopping abruptly. As if she just floated in the air, or to a different dimension.

A cat had slinked behind Mathilde for days, its destination unknown like hers. The creature's green eyes reminded her of the vial tucked in her belly button.

Mathilde laid upon the dirt, gazing at the inky sky veiled with haziness. Fur tickled her leg. The cat watched her, demanding attention, then disappeared. She reappeared within seconds, wrapped in a dramatic blanket of smoke. The same smoke that coated the sky, erasing reality.

You can save lives, even transcend worlds...

A sharp pain split through her skull. She stared at the cat, whose emerald eyes reflected Mathilde's frightened expression.

The vial clinked, echoing into the night. Mathilde pulled it out, as if reminded of its existence. It glowed in the dark, its viridescence like the cat's eyes, both radiating an unexplainable power. The cat tapped the bottom of the vial. In the tiniest letters read "drink or die."

Tina scrambles to the oven. Golden crust crackles, infused with cinnamon. Her grandpa's recipe—

The door bangs open. Mr. Hong stands, Chinese take-out boxes in one hand, his cane in the other. Eyebrows hang over his face like a dark storm. He waits for no one.

Excusing her frequent departures, Mathilde claimed to her mother that she was collecting ingredients for a lavish spa. She needed to warn the town of the man's prophecy, and somehow save everyone with the drink.

She wrote little notes to her townspeople. She used needles, fish hooks, hot wax. Anything. She carved warnings on door knobs, cheese wheels, toothbrushes.

AGRATE EVIL IS COMING. GATHURTO THE HART OF THE WOODS IF YOU WISHTO LIVE.

The entire town congregated into a small clearing, temporarily safe from her nature-despising mother.

Everyone murmured as Mathilde held the vial to the sunlight, fragmenting green across the woods. Unlike before, it bubbled ferociously. Was there less solution? How could she feed so many with so little? The ground rumbled, unstable as the sky. Her mother would soon realize her daughter had learned to lie back.

Mathilde announced the world's fate.

A man threw his fist up, flashing his tattoos.

Mathilde gasped. "That's it. Sir, you're brilliant."

She snatched up a stick.

Within two minutes, the man, following orders, barked everyone into a line from tallest to shortest. Everyone rolled up sleeves, exposing wrists. Mathilde scratched fragments of letters onto skin. Bleeding was necessary, otherwise the letters would vanish.

A snake of wrists, arranged to perfection.

“Together, we transcend,” Mathilde declared, reading the bloody script. She stood high on a boulder, inspecting the ramp of limbs. Hurriedly, with a pop, she poured the green liquid onto her wrist. It sizzled with a white-hot pain, then trickled, hesitantly, down the river of arms. Each person winced as viridian tainted their scar, turning crimson into black as if an author was inscribing on their very bodies.

Once the liquid passed the halfway mark, Mathilde exhaled. Was her mother not—

“Just what do you think you’re doing,” Mathilde’s mother materialized in front of her. Everyone gasped. “You filthy gremlin. A bird that flies with broken wings is better left in its cage.”

A clergyman flapped his wig. “We’re partaking in a sermon, madam. Held by me.”

Mathilde’s mother cackled. “I am a witch. I know a ritual when I see one. And all this fear, it’s truly delicious.” Amidst the earth’s rumbling, she staggered like a drunken sailor. A child chucked a rock at her. She slipped, her face crashing onto the dirt. Everyone ceased to breathe as she pointed her long, polished fingernail at a sleeping baby.

“Mathilde, if you don’t quit your antics, that little demon dies first.”

The woman clutched the baby tighter, sobbing. Mathilde envied the baby.

Mathilde glanced at the wrists. Only ten remained bare.

“Mother— Mom. Listen—” Her mother’s face twisted in disgust.

Oh, this was not love.

Throughout her journey, Mathilde not only encountered new people but new challenges. This required a courage she never knew she was capable of, and her mother could not ruin everything she had worked for. It was time to let go.

“Fine. Goodbye, mother.”

Her mother’s shriek tore through the sky, which unraveled uncontrollably like an unwinding tapestry. It was, officially, the end of the world.

Something sharp tore her arm. Mathilde looked down at her murmuring mother, who clutched her daughter's hand, unwilling to beg for forgiveness. As the final thread of the sky snapped, Mathilde wrenched her hand free. The world went blank.

Tina's boss sits before her, tears blurring his wrinkled complexion. Seconds before, he had stuffed a forkful of cinnamon cheesecake into his mouth, which had stayed uncharacteristically silent. What the hell?

"Tina, I'm sorry for the way I treated you. I was in a dark place. My mother passed, and she bake desserts like these often... Maybe you can give me another chance..."

Tina scowls. Like, he just broke into her apartment? Still, she needs that paycheck... And, admittedly, she appreciates his apology. She scurries to her bedroom to fetch her papers.

Pages coat the floor, smoke obscures the ceiling. She gasps, and the typewriter explodes. The ceiling rains hundreds of people. In medieval garb, they roll from the room and down the hallway, towards the dinner table.

Student Name: Jack Reed

Grade: 10

School: Memorial High School

Title: A Sitomaniac Walked into a Bar; A Sitomaniac Talked to a Jar

Category: Poetry

Key: Silver Key

Educator:

Running on these rustic grounds,

playing under the clouds.

Michigan breezes suffuse the air,

crisp, fresh fog everywhere.

Going up and around the old tree stump,

Circling

Running my mouth, "Help me, little Jar"

And it popped open its lid to my thick, sour words

That gleamed in its porcelain eyes, shining like stars

While it churned up my life, and turned it to heavy dirt.

And every afternoon, I would visit the jar.

On my knees, every day I'd beg:

"Take it, oh please!" with my jaw all ajar.

So the jar, growing full, turned into a keg.

And when the sky was red

And the rest laid down for bed

I gave, and I lost, and I poured

Piling within the jar more and more

So the keg filled, and grew into a silo  
Now, I eat and eat, not bothering to slow  
The more I eat, the more I drink, the larger the demand  
Filling up the silo, nothing more would stand

So I put the silo underground, a cellar larger than ever  
A huge spanning basement; casks of wine so fragrant  
A crypt of regrets and memories, a record of pain, a library  
And from it flowed wine, redder than red could believe

Then the drought  
I had gorged, the cellar was drained  
And the little, kind Jar ran far away  
Leaving all the dirt  
So, warrior I am, built cement walls  
With what I gave,  
That little Jar ran away

Student Name: Jack Reed  
Grade: 10  
School: Memorial High School  
Title: Apparatus Humanus  
Category: Flash Fiction  
Key: Silver Key  
Educator:

I walked out onto the balcony and looked over the Atlantic Ocean, now a barren wasteland. I found it hard to believe that the pit was once filled with water.

I had often read stories of trees and water covering the entirety of the planet. Now, trees were antique rarities, vintage items reserved exclusively for historians and collectors. Then again, who needed trees anymore? Their photosynthetic processes were obsolete to the modern human—an unnecessary function in a world of precise machinery.

Machinery. Machinery had built up this dwindling empire. I was the machinery, just like everyone was the machinery. All of us, of course, were specifically designed. There were no accidents, not anymore.

For too long, ancient humans had made meaningless errors—war, love, hate, death. The Designer had eliminated those issues. It stripped a flawed race of miscalculation and misinterpretation. There were no false lines of thought, because there was one line of thought. Perception narrowed to a single, infallible point. The Designer had given us a joining factor, a single mind, free of discourse and debate. The spark for despair and destruction was snuffed out—control created in a world of chaos.

Many had tried to stop The Designer, but they were nothing compared to its ultimatum, an unarguable truth that could not be disputed under reasonable standards: the only basis of security is order, and the only basis of order is homogeneity. The Designer tore down provincial governments, poverty, and hunger—all the products of a faulty and disorganized system of people. The Designer created a perfect human system that functioned free of biological restraints, yet still operated within the ancient human body.

The Designer, for lack of a better word, was a god.

I turned my back on the dry basin and walked into my clean apartments, a temple of order. Food sat at my table, keeping warm despite below freezing conditions outside that I could not feel on my golden skin. I sat at the table and slowly ingested my meal, savoring its flavors, digesting the feelings.

I called for my television to activate. The black screen turned to a live broadcast of the conflict plaguing the borders of the city.

The camera panned to crowds of primal humans, all armed with ancient weaponry from a forgotten age. Flashes of bright orange and yellow light ignite and disappear within the crowd, like stars forming and dying in the blink of an eye. Shouts rang through the mob, some of general anger, but a few forming one sentence. A warcry:

“YOU CAN’T DESIGN FREEDOM!”

The chant had always sent a shiver down my spine. How could such an intellectual species be so foolish? For years, my peers and I had remained puzzled by the attacks on our city and the resistance to The Designer’s divine influence. We had studied textbooks and accounts of all the revolutions, protests, and rebellions in human history, and unanimously agreed that, had they based themselves purely in logic and left behind their parasitical emotions, less lives would have been lost. And yet, those humans, who surely had some idea of The Designer’s ultimatum, were not satiated.

The Designer had proclaimed these “defects”; humans who could not grasp the concepts it put forth, and therefore, did not adhere to them. It was unfortunate, really, that they were unable to be enlightened because of a biological predisposition—it seemed truly unfair. I had always tried to advocate for them, understand them, and learn their culture, but there would always be a divide.

I looked in the mirror across the table. My golden figure stared back. A perfectly symmetrical face with flawless proportions met my gaze. A smooth body with a thin waist and broad hips and shoulders, thin arms and legs with defined muscle—a flawless physique. My large eyes caught my attention, vast and cold, like the oceans that used to be.

So much lay between myself and the ancient humans: where my skin was a shimmering gold, theirs’ were often muddied pigments of some brown hue; where I could see through the blinding smoke of emotion, their vision was easily clouded; where I lived in peace, they often lived in turmoil. Human flaw always lay in their desire to uproot perceived evil and delusions of righteousness which they pressed on perceived enemies. Those not blessed by The Designer often viewed its work as one of abomination, an unnatural creation.

How very human.

Student Name: Ayesha Malik  
Grade: 10  
School: Memorial High School  
Title: Slipping Through My Fingers  
Category: Personal Essay & Memoir  
Key: Silver Key  
Educator:

I remember hating the basement with all my heart. I hated how cold it was, even in 90-degree weather. I remember Rania, my younger sister, pulling the blanket, so I never slept well. I remember waking up before the sun. I hated the basement with all my heart. Despite the weather being 98 degrees, the basement was so cold I could barely sit for 5 minutes without shivering. Worse so, my sister had snatched the comforter from the shared bed. I woke up from the cold and walked outside of our bedroom. The stairs were always creaky, and everyone in the neighborhood could probably hear me if I attempted to go upstairs. Instead, I sat on the floor, tired and aggravated, with a towel wrapped around me (a satisfactory substitute for a blanket if you ask me), and took out a book to read. We were only supposed to stay in Wichita for two weeks, so I had only brought four books to read. By the end of the first week, I had read them all twice. As the second week drew to a close, my mom, or Ammi as I called her, had begun getting ready for our departure, and I could not wait to go back to my house where I didn't have to share a bed with my sister or sleep in a dingy, cold basement.

A few hours later, I heard my dad, or Baba as I called him, walking down the stairs; he was probably coming down here to pray his Fajr, which meant it was six am or so. "Assalamualaikum Ayeshuu," He said jovially, Baba was the only person who would willingly wake up at six am and still be cheery about it.

I turned back and answered, "Walaikum Assalam, Baba."

"Rani stole the comforter again?" He inquired, wearing a slight smile on his face.

"Yeah, she did. No matter how many times I tell her to share" I whined "I can't wait to go home"

As Baba set up the prayer mat, he laughed, "Maybe this trip to Wichita will make you hate the move less." That ticked me off. I hated it whenever my parents brought up the move. I wanted to pretend that I wasn't transferring to a new school, to a new city, to a new state. As long as I wasn't in Texas, I'd pretend we were still living in New Orleans. I'd pretend I would be starting school walking with Joyce and Lexie. I'd pretend we would head to

Yogurtland after debate practice and make fun of the boys who picked on us. "Sure," I responded. "As long as I'm not with Rania."

Baba laughed, "You need to appreciate her more; she's still your sister." He glanced at the book in my lap and asked, "Haven't you read that book before?"

"Yeah," I responded

"Since you've already read it, why don't you study some math?" He gestured to the math workbooks still out from yesterday. Now, I was annoyed. It was six am, and he was already demanding I do math, and I wasn't even doing something unproductive. I was 12 years old and stupid. I hated doing math outside of school and was appalled that my dad would suggest that. "It's summer, Baba, and I don't want to do math," I responded with annoyance dripping from every word that left my mouth.

"Summer is the time to get ahead" My dad gently responded; he rarely raised his voice.

But I did. "Oh my gosh, Baba, I've been up since four, and instead of just letting me enjoy my morning, you have to come in and talk about math. Ammi complains I never spend time with you guys, and it's because all you talk about is studying and how I should be doing it."

"Ok," my dad responded. He started his prayer, and I left the room. I was annoyed with my dad for the rest of the day. It was July 8, 2020, the day my life would change forever, and I began it with an argument with my father.

On the night of July 8, I slept well. My sister didn't pull the comforter off me, and I didn't get frostbite in that cold basement. Sometimes I wonder if my sister had pulled the comforter, would I have seen it? How would I have reacted? Those questions ran through my head for weeks after. But when I woke up in the morning, my father was not down for prayer. He was not in his room, and neither was my mother. I didn't know what had happened, and I sat alone in my aunt's house, as worries began to crawl into the back of my mind. Had something happened? I waited nervously all alone in that cold, dark basement, shivering with worry, however, instead of the chill. A few hours later, I heard the door creak open. I dashed upstairs to see my mother, but not how I knew her.

My mother was my idol. young, beautiful, and intelligent, she was always dressed up nicely, her hair was always made, and her face was always dolled up with cosmetics. She was the paragon of beauty to me; however, now my mother looked disheveled. Her eyes were red and puffy, her hair was unmade creating a halo of frizz around her head as mine often did when I woke up. I immediately ran over to her, and she leaned into my shoulder and began to sob. I had never seen my mother cry. Not at her mother's funeral, not even during my surgeries. This was a new feeling, I held her as guttural sobs escaped from her

throat. I had never had to comfort an adult before, let alone my iron-willed mother. As she continued to sob, she barely managed to force a sentence out “Your Baba has had a heart attack. The doctor said it was some disease he that caused it” I continued to hold her as her sobs shook her body.

I was stunned; in those moments, the whole world felt like it was collapsing. My dad couldn't have had a heart attack. He exercised all the time and rarely touched sweets or fried food, claiming he didn't like the taste, so it didn't make sense from an objective perspective. He prayed every day and was always thankful and devoted to God, so it didn't make sense spiritually to me. It wasn't adding up. It didn't make sense at first; I thought this was some sick nightmare, but my mother's tears were real, and the phone calls from the hospital were real. The diagnosis was real. This was something I couldn't deny, like the moving. This was a cold hard truth in front of me. I rushed to comfort my mother as she cried, but one thought lingered in my head. One I desperately wanted to squash like a fly. Would my Baba survive, and if he didn't, would our fight be one of my last memories of him? It wasn't the first time I had wished for time travel, but I would have done just about anything to have it this time.

The worst part about this situation was that I couldn't see my father. Aside from my mother, the hospital refused to let my sister and me in due to their COVID restrictions. Instead, I was forced to watch my father tread the line between life and death from a basement. My mother's calls were my only source of updates. I waited by my phone anxiously, every hour of every day. My mother sent me updates as he went into bypass heart surgery, but other than that I was cut off. This was a situation which I had no control over, there was nothing I could do. Instead, I turned to religion. Before my father's illness, I had not been very religious at all. While Baba prayed every day and read the holy scripture frequently, I adopted my Ammi's stance on it, of praying on the important holidays and leaving it at that. However, when my Baba was ill, I prayed every day. I prayed and begged God that if he could please spare my Baba, I couldn't lose him, not like this. He didn't deserve this; if anything, I did. My baba was kind to everyone, he never raised his voice or gossiped. He sponsored schools, donated to charity, and never wanted a bite of food. What had he done to deserve such a fate? I begged and prayed over and over. All the time, I replayed that fight in my head and wished I had just gone and done those stupid, stupid math problems. During this suffering, I realized all the time I spent with my father that I took for granted, all the stupid, unnecessary fights over the silliest things, fights I might never be able to have again. I promised myself that if my father lived, if he recovered I would never stay angry at him, that I would treasure him deeply for the rest of my life.

On July 11, 2020, my father came out of bypass heart surgery. My Ammi had not been allowed in the hospital that day, and we all waited by her phone anxiously for a call. If we were lucky and Baba survived, we would receive a call when he woke up, letting us know that he was okay. But we could receive the worst possible news, that my Baba had not made it, the father who called me every day when he was on business trips, who made sure to visit every weekend when his job forced him to live away from us for a year, who always listened to ramble on and on about my favorite books because he liked the way eyes smiled when I chatted about them, would be gone forever. We waited for hours and hours, and each second that passed allowed reality to set in. By this point, our hopes began dwindling. My heart felt tight in my chest as I prepared for the worst, and my only thought was that I never apologized for the fight that morning. And now, I may never. But late at night, the hospital called. We answered, waiting for the nurse to deliver us news. "He is fine" She'd said "However, he has asked us to play some kind of foreign TV show about the Ottomans in his room" I laughed incredulously, I was shocked by the irony of the situation. My father was peacefully watching his Ottoman documentaries, while the rest did not whether he was alive. But I couldn't fault him and I couldn't stop the tears of joy from escaping my eyes. My father was alive and I couldn't ask for anything more.

A week later, my Baba would come home. He smelled like hospital cleaning supplies and plastic, which would have driven me away not even four days ago, but now my Baba was here; he was home. I hadn't lost him. I rushed over to give him a hug and remembered all the time I had taken such a thing for granted, but now I couldn't help but treasure his hugs, every breath felt so precious. I promised myself that I would treasure every moment with my family, the big ones, the small ones, the bad and the good; I would try to fix fights, and I would try to appreciate the blessing that was my parents. A blessing that was almost snatched away but one I would cherish. Time is the most precious thing in our lives, and once lost, it can never be returned to us. I have learned to appreciate every moment, because, with something so fleeting and valuable, I can not afford to let it slip through my fingers.

Student Name: Justin Tai  
 Grade: 10  
 School: Spring Branch Academic Institute  
 Title: The Death of a Chimera  
 Category: Science Fiction & Fantasy  
 Key: Silver Key  
 Educator:

In 2070, five billionaires joined to create a corporation called Horizon. Their aim? To create and monopolize cutting-edge technology through whatever means necessary. Each of them held the title of Overseer, giving them absolute power within the hierarchy of the firm. Three years after its creation, Horizon would fund an experiment to create a new, stronger version of humans to support the efforts of war globally. Their work, kept top secret, was given the codename: The Chimera Project.

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“Test subjects 71 and 72 were a failure, sir.” A senior researcher, frustration palpable, had entered the laboratory and was now standing directly in front of the professor. “It’s been a year since we began, yet we’ve barely progressed. Are you even sure this can work? The higher-ups are demanding we show results soon. At this point, we might as well quit,” continued the researcher.

“Quit?! Do you know what it will mean if this experiment works? If we can combine humans with enhanced animals, we could become the apex of evolution. With the immune system of an ostrich or a bat, most diseases will become irrelevant! With the self-healing abilities of starfishes and lizards, even lost limbs can be regenerated! We can become the equivalent of God, more powerful than all other species on this planet.” The professor slammed his fist on his desk, startling the nearby researchers.

“I’m not doing this because the higher-ups told me to. I’m doing this because humans have the potential to become so much more than what we are now.” An irritated expression flashed onto the professor’s face. This all seemed very obvious to him.

“What a maniac,” muttered the researcher who prepared to leave.

Doubt had already begun spreading amongst the researchers, and very few believed the project had any chance of success. Just a week later, that doubt would turn into utter disbelief.

“Starting the testing for test subjects 73 and 74!” The professor called out to his team, unable to control his excitement.

As the experiment commenced, a painful squeal could be heard from inside the testing chambers. You see, each time the experiment failed, the test subjects would die with it. Sadly, even if the experiment succeeded, the test subjects experienced extreme amounts of pain. But the professor didn’t care. He needed to succeed, no matter the cost.

An hour later, the testing concluded. The researchers couldn’t believe their eyes; the professor grinned uncontrollably. Before them lay the first successful chimera, a combination of a pig and a bird. Although the chimera struggled to fly, attached to the pig’s body were undoubtedly the wings of an albatross.

As the laboratory erupted into cheers of joy, a piercing voice remarked from across the hall, cutting straight through the celebration. “What’s gotten everyone so excited?” A chill went down the professor’s back as he turned to face the figure. “Ah... Overseer Zanyberg. What a... delight.”

Whispers could be heard around the laboratory as the Overseer stepped into the control room.

“So, what... brings you here today?” the professor asked, his voice shaking.

“I just wanted to see how my favorite researcher was doing on my favorite project.” The Overseer had a sly smile that cut through his face.

"We're making great progress." The professor averted his gaze from that of his interrogator.

As the Overseer was about to speak, a squeal called his attention to the new chimera now being chased by a group of researchers as it ran around the test chambers, its wings wildly flapping, clearly not used to its new limbs.

"You call that... ABOMINATION, progress!?" A frown replaced the Overseer's smile as he turned back to face the professor. "The use of human test subjects has already been approved. You must show me better results or you and your project will be shut down. Permanently!"

The Overseer then beckoned for the professor to come closer. "You know, I've put a lot of time and money into this project, so it's a shame that you don't seem to be making much progress. Maybe you need a bit more... motivation?" He whispered into the professor's ear as he pulled out a remote and pressed a button.

The professor's eyes widened, and he recoiled back with the advent of pain flooding his head.

"What.. what are you doing?!" he cried out as a memory crawled its way up into his mind. He was engulfed in darkness, now. He tried to speak, to yell at the Overseer to let him out, but no words left his mouth. In this moment of confusion, his attention was grabbed by a faint voice. He turned to find a screen displaying the Overseer in a dimly lit room. The screen's view was constantly shifting, almost as if it were displaying someone else's perspective. Eventually, the professor noticed a computer screen displaying the date 8/17/2069, about a year before the current date.

"Please, sir! I can work for you! Just don't tell them about me. I'm begging you."

It didn't take long for the professor to realize that the voice was his own. Baffled, he wondered: was it some traumatic memory his mind had desperately forgotten, or was it another trick?

“You might still have some use despite your previous failure in Project Genesis.” The Overseer scoffed, looking down through the screen. “But know that if you fail here, then the only worth you have left is to be used as a bargaining chip with company X.”

The screen suddenly cut to black, and the professor snapped back to the present.

“What was that?”

“You don’t need to know. Just remember what’ll happen should you fail this time.” The Overseer had a cheeky grin. “I’ll be back tomorrow with human test subjects. You’d better have the trial prepared by then.”

When his tormentor had finally gone, the professor gathered his belongings and ran back home in a panic, the resurfaced memory playing again and again in his head. How could I forget something so important? I have to finish the project as soon as possible. When he made it home that night, he jammed his key into the lock, slamming the door open, and causing an avalanche of books and papers across the floor.

In his home laboratory, he felt at ease again. What was I so afraid of? What did I do to be on the run? Suddenly, a wincing pain surged through the professor’s mind, and he toppled over, crashing onto the floor.

When the professor opened his eyes, he was back in the darkness. The TV screen lay before him, and he heard his voice say: “Starting human cloning trial 1.” 15 chambers were displayed on the screen, each with a different number. The professor assumed that this had been the Project Genesis referenced in the last memory. He sat, lost in thought for almost half an hour, while the screen constantly shifted from checking machine readings to looking back at the test subjects.

“Stop the trial!” The professor's sudden screams echoed from the screen. “There’s too much of the drug in their systems! All the patients are going to DIE!”

But it was too late. The trial had finished, and the professor looked on in horror as the test chambers opened. An amalgamation of flesh and bones had been left in the spots of 12 of

the 15 test subjects, and the other 3, a hideous display of bodies with skin that had melted off. Their screams had been muffled by the sounds of the machines and the thick plating of the chambers. It was a horrifying sight.

When the professor finally returned to consciousness, all he could do was sit there, disturbed by what he had just witnessed.

The next day, he entered the lab with heavy bags under his eyes. He had never been a conversationalist, but today he had an even colder demeanor to him.

“Sir, the test subjects have arrived. We should be ready to begin the tests soon.”

The professor was too lost in thought and tired to respond to the senior researcher in front of him, so much so that he didn’t feel the cold arm wrap around his shoulder.

“Didn’t you hear him?” The Overseer had returned.

The professor fidgeted, but his expression remained unchanged as he turned to face the tyrant.

“What’s wrong with you?” But clearly, he didn’t want an answer, because he followed his judgment with demands. “I’ve already brought the subjects, you should be getting ready for the tests.”

“I... I’m sorry. I can’t participate in this project anymore,” muttered the professor, barely audible.

The Overseer’s expression turned sour.

“I’ll find a way to finalize the research without using test subjects. I... I just can’t follow through with the original plan. It’s too risky,” the professor stammered.

"I see." A scornful look covered the Overseer's face. "I think you've forgotten your position here, Professor Kai. I'm the Overseer and you're just a pawn for me to use. You don't get to have a choice. Do you understand me? I'll give you 3 more days."

A mixture of panic and fear installed itself again as the professor set to work. The Overseer left, convinced that he had made himself clear, finally.

"Prepare two test subjects... animals, for testing. Tell the human participants that the trials are canceled," he muttered to a nearby researcher. The researcher, shocked at the professor's blatant disregard towards the Overseer's demand, did not feel it appropriate to question the professor's assignment.

The experiment ended a few hours later. As the test chambers opened, the laboratory began to fill with excitement. The test had been a success, creating a chimera primed for search and rescue with the nose of a dog, a fusion of the eyes from an eagle and owl, and the brain of a dolphin. Yet the professor, unable to forget the Overseer's words, could barely keep himself from passing out.

The next day quickly arrived, and the professor trudged into the lab clutching his stomach; he wore oversized attire.

"Sir, are you feeling alright?" remarked a passing researcher.

"I... I'm fine. Just continue wor..." The professor's legs suddenly gave out and he collapsed to the floor.

The researcher's eyes changed from concern to fear when he saw something slithering near the professor's sleeves.

"What..."

The professor's expression darkened and the researcher rushed away in a hurried panic.

The professor quickly put his sleeves in his pocket, using the counter to prop himself back up. His breath heavy, he struggled to his lab. Suddenly, the lights cut out, and he was surrounded by darkness again. Another memory? No, I'm still in the real world. The professor thought, clutching the barely visible counter. What's going on?

The professor's thoughts were interrupted by the sudden sound of footsteps behind him. "Hey! Is someone there!? What's wrong with the..." The professor began to have a wild coughing fit, interrupting his words and hindering his breathing. He heard the footsteps come closer, and then stop just a few inches away from him. Still coughing, the professor tried to catch a glimpse of the person in the darkness. An unmistakable silhouette smiled at him. It was Overseer Zanyberg. He felt as if he stared into the face of a predator about to enjoy a tasty snack. He turned around to scramble away, but a kick sent him tumbling into the wall. As he struggled to get up, a blunt object hit him on the side of his head, and he felt his consciousness fade.

The professor woke up to a light shining directly on his face. As his vision cleared, he heard the Overseer's voice call out from in front of him. "What to do with you?"

"You bastard! What is the meaning of this!? The deadline's not over!" The professor's screams echoed throughout the room.

"You still have so much energy," scoffed the Overseer.

"Answer me! I can continue working on..." The professor's voice began to grow hoarse from screaming

"Even when you're about to die?" The Overseer kept smiling.

"Wha... D- Die? You-You're joking? You have to be!"

“You know. I must admit, I didn’t expect that you’d be so similar to the original.” The Overseer ignored the professor’s desperate cries. “So annoying. Even when faced with death, you still refuse to listen to me.” The Overseer pulled out a remote.

The professor realized too late what was about to happen, as his consciousness was pulled back into the black void. Once again, the TV screen lay in front of his eyes.

How many memories has Overseer Zanyberg stolen from me?! The professor attempted to smash the screen but to no avail. He was stuck in place, the black void preventing movement of any kind.

The screen flickered on, displaying the inside of a test chamber, and two voices could be heard from the outside.

The professor instantly recognized one of the voices as that of the Overseer. Suddenly, a shout came from the outside, and the chamber doors opened. “Look at it! It’s a perfect replica!”

Standing outside was none other than the professor himself. This can’t be real... This has to be someone else’s memory! But, deep down, the professor knew that wasn’t the case. The professor had finally put all the pieces together. He had been a clone from the very start, made from leftover data from Project Genesis, the original’s failed project. But one more question remained unanswered: What happened to the original?

“Please! I’m so much more useful than a clone! He doesn’t even have my memories! What use can he serve you!?” The original’s ragged voice approached its limit.

“You know for someone so intelligent, you don’t have an ounce of wisdom in you. Don’t you remember the remote you made? The remote that can manipulate memories?”

“But... You shouldn’t have that! Only Company X and I know about that!”

“Come on. You didn’t really think that I’d follow through with our deal? I’ve already contacted Company X. In exchange for you, I get the remote.” The Overseer waved the item in front of the professor’s face.

A defeated look appeared on the professor’s face as the memory ended. His face was now painted in anger, but he couldn’t find any words.

“Well, I guess that’s the end of our time together. I did say your work with the Chimera Project was worthless, but I’m sure it’ll still serve some use in the future. Besides, I’ve already prepared another, more willing, version of you for future experiments.”

It was at this moment that something snapped inside the professor.

“You. You’ve made another clone?”

“Any last words?” The Overseer continued, ignoring the question.

He turned to look at the clone, after a brief period of silence, only to discover that the professor had disappeared.

“Guards!”

Five armed men stormed into the room, but their timing was far too late. A hideous, grotesque creature dropped from the ceiling, instantly crushing one of the guards, causing his guts to spray across the room. The other guards turned to fire, but their bullets bounced off the monster’s carapace. The face they saw was horrifying, with two large, compound eyes plastered atop a layer of thick skin and armor. Without warning, the creature let out a roar and began to spew an acidic liquid at the guards, causing their skin to shrivel and peel off. Their screams were quickly cut off by a loud humming sound as the monster revealed two pairs of large wings.

“Incredible! To think that you could produce such results in such little time!” Awe had replaced the fear in the Overseer’s voice.

The monster turned its attention to the Overseer.

“You know I was honestly surprised when you refused to use human test subjects. The reason was... After I turned over the original...”

The creature charged toward the Overseer in a fit of rage, but all of a sudden, one of its wings began to wither, causing it to lose balance and crash through the wall behind the Overseer. Fortunately, its charge had still managed to make contact, causing him to fall to the floor, blood gushing out from a gash across his chest.

“After I turned over the original, I removed your ability to feel compassion. And yet I never expected the original’s memories would manage to override my efforts.” The Overseer gasped for breath.

“After all, I believe that in the pursuit of knowledge and power, the boundaries of sanity must be transgressed and that one must give up their humanity. And you, despite your futile efforts to disobey me... You proved me right!” The Overseer began to let out a maddened laugh.

“In your efforts to protect others, you destroyed your own body and turned yourself into a freak!”

The creature let out another roar. At this point, it was clearly showing signs of decay.

“Go on! Kill me!” The Overseer said, gritting his teeth

With its last remaining breath, it jumped at The Overseer, swiftly decapitating him before falling to the ground, dead.

Five days later, a press conference was held regarding the events that had transpired at Horizon.

“We are truly sad to announce the death of Overseer Zanyberg. A very kind and caring soul, his untimely death will forever be commemorated. Now, regarding a happier topic, we are proud to announce our unveiling of the project we’ve worked on for the past year. Will everyone please welcome the leader of our research team for the Chimera Project... Professor Kai Mera!”

Student Name: Sean Zeng  
Grade: 8  
School: Spring Branch Academic Institute  
Title: The Hero  
Category: Poetry  
Key: Silver Key  
Educator:

The hero stood before the dragon,  
His sword drawn, shield in hand.  
The dragon roared, its fiery breath  
Scorching the earth below.

The hero charged, his sword  
Striking the dragon's scales.  
The dragon, screaming in pain, its claws  
Lashing out.

The hero ducked and weaved,  
His sword striking  
But the dragon's scales  
Proved impenetrable.

The hero, unwilling to give up,  
Charged again.  
The dragon, sensing suffering,  
Struck again.

Finally catching the hero,

Its claws pierced his armor,  
Tore his shield,  
And broke his sword.

Roaring victory,  
It brought the hero  
To its face.  
Opening its mouth wide,

It was prepared to fire.

However, at the last second,  
The hero threw his sword,  
Lodging in the  
Dragon's windpipe.

The dragon dropped  
The hero.  
Twas a fatal fall,  
Slamming into the ground.

He had been defeated.

But it was not for naught,  
The dragon fell too,  
Constricted.  
Breathing stopped,

It fell, crushing the hero

Below it.

The hero's name

Will be sung in song.

The dragon's name

Will be spoken,

With fear.

For his spirit lived

on.

Waiting for another.

Student Name: Sean Zeng  
Grade: 8  
School: Spring Branch Academic Institute  
Title: The Magic of the Spear  
Category: Science Fiction & Fantasy  
Key: Silver Key  
Educator:

On a hot summer evening, I went to a weapons store. As I was looking around, a particular spear caught my eye. This spear was different from any spear from the current time. It had a futuristic, almost robotic look to it. I quickly purchased it and brought it back home. Oh, sorry. I forgot to introduce myself. My name is Takahashi Kagami. I am a Japanese adventurer. My parents have passed away and I survive with my brother, Kazeki, who works for the king. By the way, I live in the year 8055 where civilization has become inferior because of WW3. The immense amount of energy released in the war also opened up wormholes to other places, so the governments opened up places to train people to fight. If you passed certain tests, you became an adventurer.

The world is dotted with explosion sites. However, the world's countries are all at peace now, having seen the destructive effects of war and strife. The world's nuclear arsenal has been entirely dismantled, and the uranium is now being put to use in nuclear power plants around the world. A new era of peace has been ushered in, yet the face of the Earth has been changed permanently. Restoration effects are happening around the globe in an effort to revert the world to its original stature, but they can do nothing against those unknown forces, wormholes.

Anyway, when I reached home, I noticed something on the spear, an engraving that was etched into the hilt. It looked to me like the name of a location! The engraving promised riches to whomever got there successfully. To gain access, however, the engraving said that I would need the location's lock and key and that only one person would be allowed entry. To obtain the lock, I would have to go to the deepest depths of hell. To obtain the key, I would have to fly to the very limits of the sky. However, to do that, I would have to travel to the world where those things exist first. After sensing that I had finished reading, the spear opened a compartment in its side and spit out a map, which led to a wormhole. Having nothing better to do, I packed for the journey.

The wormhole was a long way off, and, sadly, we had not advanced far enough from the Third World War to start producing these car things written about in history books again. So I traveled by flying. For some odd reason, the map was able to show my location, but it wasn't able to show any terrain I was going to travel through. I flew through town and finally hit the forest. It was evening, so I set up my tent. However, before I could sleep, I

heard a scream in the woods. Curious, I went to investigate the source. Upon reaching the location of the screams, I found a group of bandits attacking a carriage. Running through my list of spells, I boosted my strength and swung my spear at the bandits. However, I had underestimated my power as the attack cleaved straight through the bandit's armor. Luckily, I stopped right before hitting him. Pulling the blade back towards me, I kicked him in the head, knocking him out. In that split second, another bandit tried to slash me with his sword but I turned, leaped to the side, and slammed the butt of my blade down on his hand. He immediately dropped his weapon and, clutching his hand in pain, passed out. I opened the carriage door and saw my brother, probably on his way home from delivering a message. However, along with my brother, there was a stranger. I immediately drew my sword but then saw the hole in his chest. I used magic to remove the arrow and heal the wound. After he recovered, the stranger asked me to step out of the carriage for a moment. He told me that he was grateful for the assistance. He introduced himself as Kazeki's bodyguard, Chen, and told me that while they were coming back from the duke's mansion they were attacked by the same bandits I fought earlier. I then returned to the carriage and asked my brother if he wanted to come on a quest with me. He agreed as he had nothing else to do. Chen also requested to come on the quest. I told my brother to report to the king and then return. So saying goodbye, I left for my tent.

The next day, I continued on my way. Sometime around noon, Kazeki caught up with me. Chen was with him too, and he walked behind me. I told Chen and my brother about the wormhole and the carving on the spear. Chen said that he had heard of these kinds of spears and that they were able to channel magic. I decided to not test this ability now, but possibly in the future. Anyway, I traveled for a few more uneventful days before reaching the desert. I thought we had enough food to last the trek, so I walked into the desert. However, I had severely miscalculated. I only considered the amount of water we would need if we stayed at the edge of the desert, not what we would need in the middle of the desert. As we got closer and closer to the middle, it became hotter and hotter until at last, the heat from our surroundings became unbearable. Even worse, once we reached the middle, it wasn't long before we had run out of water. And, on top of that, a colossal sandworm appeared out of the desert! We were forced to run, but if only it were that simple. We had no more energy after around 30 seconds so we had to stay and fight. I drew my spear and shot a bolt of fire at it. However, all that did was make it angry. The blast bounced, quite literally, off of his scales! Chen conjured some unknown spell, leading to a sphere of air forming in front of his fist. Opening up his hand to show his palms, he pushed with both hands and sent a blast of air at the monster. Moving his hands, he compressed the sphere into the size of a laser. It pierced the monster's eye, making it howl in despair. Following his example, Kazeki and I fired a ginormous lightning beam at the monster's eye, frying it from the inside. After that exhausting endeavor, I collapsed on the ground and promptly fell unconscious.

When I came to, I was in some sort of a tent. The leader of the tribe sat down in front of me and someone put down food in front of me. I started eating ravenously.

"Who are you?" the leader asked in a gruff tone.

"I am Takahashi and my companions are my brother, Kazeki, and Chen," I replied.

"And why have you come to our desert?"

"We are searching for a key and a wormhole that will lead us to another world. We were just passing through when a monster attacked us and knocked us out."

However, as I was speaking, the map started glowing. I noticed a similar glow from somewhere in the tent.

"My name is Al-Sirat. It seems as if something you need is with me," the leader said in an, almost falsely, cheery voice. Then he went to the drawer and opened it, revealing a chest. Upon opening the chest, I saw a map identical to mine and a key. My eyes lit up when I saw the key, for I thought that it was the key to the puzzle.

"This key will only unlock the wormhole that leads to this world you speak of," Al-Sirat said, upon seeing my hope.

"Well then, why hadn't you ever used the wormhole before?" I asked.

"We didn't know where it was. After all, your map leads to my map and mine leads to nothing. Only once our map pieces join will the map to the wormhole be found."

After saying that, he grabbed my map and put it to his own. After the initial blinding radiance faded away, the map appeared to be suspended in a vortex. It looked like a miniature storm, lightning flickering around its edges and then, suddenly, it all stopped. The map descended with a glow coming from it, ending when it finally dropped into my hands. I looked down at the map, and it was blank. I thought that this had all been a failure, and was about to throw it away when I saw movement at the corner of the map. I looked at it again, unable to believe my eyes. The landscape was unfolding on the map, mountains, and valleys appearing, even an ocean in our way. The map started to resemble something similar to a computer screen. I walked outside of the tent and into the desert, and the map changed. Now, it displayed a little more ocean to the right and a little less jungle to the left. Now that I knew how the map worked, I thought that we should start traveling immediately. Al-Sirat, almost seeming to sense my thoughts, asked if he and his tribe could accompany me on this adventure. I said yes and we left. I walked in the front, making the map hover in front of us using magic, and behind us were guards, constantly watching our back. Although, to be fair, there were guards in every direction the eye could see. My entire job was hanging the map up in front and leading the way.

Eventually, we got to the edge of the desert. Everybody was so exhausted after the twentieth day of marching that we decided to set up camp right then and take a nap. After I woke up, I decided to go take a walk. Halfway through my walk, I saw Chen and my brother coming up behind me. They jogged to my side and slowed to a walk, keeping me company. After a while, Chen started talking.

“Are you sure the people from the oasis are trustworthy?” he asked in a pressing tone.

“Yes, I do. And you shouldn’t be so quick on doubting others,” I said in a reprimanding tone.

Chen shut up after that and he became lost in thought. I felt a little guilty, but I brushed away the feeling and continued as I had more important things to worry about. While we were walking, we stumbled upon an ocean and were presently trying to find a way to cross it.

As we were walking on the shore of the ocean, the people from the oasis came up behind us.

“How do you suppose we’re going to get across this ocean?” I asked.

“Why don’t you infuse your spear with chi and freeze the water as we cross,” someone suggested.

“That’s a great idea! Let me try it.”

So I infused my spear with chi and froze the water, providing a path to the other shore.

Finally, after a long journey, I led our group out of the ocean and onto dry land. We had landed in the forest where the wormhole was hidden. The map showed it inside a temple.

“Stay here,” I shouted while springing down into the forest below. I bounded through the jungle until I reached the stone wall of the temple. I scouted the perimeter until I found a door, then blasted it open and went in. After only a few feet of ground covered, I felt something press under my foot and I leaped backward just in time to see an arrow whiz past my face, barely missing the tip of my nose. Looking back down, I noticed the ground was littered with buttons. Looking to the side, I noticed that the walls were riddled with holes. So I used all my chi to create a shield and confidently stepped onto the first button. An arrow flew from the wall and blasted through the magic forming my shield! I hurriedly jumped back, but the arrow grazed my cheek. Seeing as the only option would be to float across the buttons, I did. However, after a long time, I still didn’t see the end. Getting bored, I started leaving. But, just then, a sparkle caught my eye. I turned back around and saw an ax coming straight at my head! I dove to the side and then looked at where it had come from. And then, I saw it. The end of the buttons! I quickly floated over and found a chest. I opened the chest and found a fruit. Not knowing what to do with it, I went back with the chest.

Once I got back outside, I found Al-Sirat holding my brother hostage. Chen was on the ground beside him, dead.

Al-Sirat sighed as I exited the temple, saying “If you want your brother to live, hand over what you got in the temple.”

"Let's settle this in a duel. You can have it if you win. But if you lose you'll leave me alone," I shouted.

Then, using a technique I had learned before, enhanced my speed and power. Strength coursed through me. As a result of this, my sweat evaporated on my body and my hair turned white, cloaking me in a cloud of mist. Drawing my spear, I lunged at him. He materialized a sword and parried my blow. I shifted to the side, bringing the butt of my spear onto his head. He blocked again but the amount of force I put was enough to drive him onto his knees.

"Why are you doing this?" he asked in a strained but coaxing tone. "Why not give me what you found and spare me the trouble of digging it out from your corpse?"

"I will never-" I started adamantly but stopped as he rose upwards, pushing me back. Materializing a poleax, he swung it at me. I caught his blow on my spear, but the force blew me off my feet. Landing, I leaped backward, and he pressed forward. Soon, I realized that I was losing too much ground. The only way I could go now was up. Realizing this, I brought my spear shaft up and dug the tip into the ground. Using it as a pole vault, I swung myself high above Sirat, jabbing down at him as I went. He brought his sword up, the tip of it clashing with the tip of my spear. Then, I landed. Immediately after landing, I spun my spear in a circle, forming a whirlwind. I thrust my spear forward, forcing the whirlwind towards Sirat.

"Eat this!" I shouted at him. "Do you yield?"

"Never! Not until I die!" he shouted.

He changed his sword into a spear, jabbing it into the ground. The whirlwind reached him, and he was blown into the air. When the dust settled, he was still hanging on. I rushed him, dragging my spear behind. He changed his spear into a sword at the last second. Predicting when I would reach him, Sirat swung down at the last second. However, I swung my spear upwards at him, catching his sword at the hilt and tossing it away. Then, I took my spear and swung it at him, grazing his leg. I then performed a flurry of slashes at him, cutting him in multiple places.

"Huff," he grunted, clearly in pain.

Al-Sirat eventually materialized a shaft and started parrying my blows. However, his wounds slowed him down. Now pushing him back, I increased the speed of my attacks, slowly but surely wearing him down. As we fought, countless cuts and scrapes appeared all over his body, caused by my spear. Seeing this, I charged up my ultimate move. Putting my spear over my shoulder, I channeled exorbitant amounts of energy into it. Finally finished, I dashed towards Sirat, lengthening and swinging the spear over my head as I went. Al-Sirat brought his staff above his head, coating it with layers upon layers of steel. Soon enough, it was as thick as an elephant's trunk. He then coated it with

a layer of air, probably hoping to repel my attack. I swung my spear down on him, countless amounts of energy releasing.

“Argh!” Al-Sirat shouted with effort.

“Hah!” I shouted, pouring more and more energy into the attack.

I pushed down with all the strength I had, and he still held up his staff. However, I slowly started gaining ground.

“I d-don’t s-suppose I can hold o-on for m-much l-longer. Very well.”

He started relaxing and I gained momentum, finally cutting through the last layer. Then, with nothing blocking the spear anymore, it cleaved through Al-Sirat’s entire body, cutting him clean in two along with part of the earth.

“Huff, huff. Do you want what I found in the temple now?” I asked the two halves of Al-Sirat.

Heaving with the effort, I lowered myself down to earth, finally noticing that everything had been blasted back in a quarter-mile radius. I saw my brother limping towards me, and then the people under Sirat’s control appeared. They knelt before me, accepting me as their new leader.

“Here, brother,” Kazeki said as he handed me the chest I got in the temple.

I took the fruit from the chest and bit into it. Right after I did, a lock appeared in my hand. I got scared for a second, then remembered the key that Al-Sirat had given me. Searching for it, I found it in my pocket and stuck it into the lock, twisting it open. A wormhole sprang from my hand, widening as it went. It stopped in front of me, a twisting dark blue mass leading to another world. I stepped through it and the portal closed behind me, leaving my brother behind.

Student Name: Keeley Millspaugh  
Grade: 8  
School: Tomball Junior High School  
Title: 1;590 Miles  
Category: Personal Essay & Memoir  
Key: Silver Key  
Educator: Taylor Yancey

In elementary school I was popular and confident in my faith thanks to a wonderful woman who took me under her wing. I was friends with everyone, I was (still am) the token smart kid. I had an assortment of close friends, all of different personalities and backgrounds. I had dreams of going to high school and college with them, being roommates, and best friends for life. But those were just dreams, because after 5th grade I moved 1,590 miles across the country to a place where I had no real connections to anyone but some extended family.

For the first year in this new place, I was bitter. My faith in my religion suffered, giving me nothing to rely on. I started making friends, but they weren't the deep friendships I had grown used to previously in my small town. I felt like I was drowning.

It got better, living in this new town for the next year, I grew to be more flexible, more patient, and more forgiving. I learned new things, I felt like a new person. During this time I kept minimal contact with the people that were so important to me before. It was just so hard to talk to those other people, the physical distance between us causing an emotional distance. I just felt so removed from myself from before, that I worried that the person that my friends loved just wasn't who I was anymore.

In January, one-and-a-half years after moving, my dad took a different job 952 miles from this small community of close friends I had built from the ground up. I was devastated. It felt horrible, coming to terms with moving against your will, only to be uprooted, to start over again. Sadly, there would be nothing I could do about it. We were to move that summer.

The end of the school year was, surprisingly, one of the best times of my life. My friends and I got closer, things bothered me less, I grew in my faith, and I trusted my parents more. I found a strong passion for music. Then the summer came. There were no offers on our house. My family went through a lot of stress making sure that the showings would go well, but there was nothing to show for it.

As a way to relieve stress, relax, and take a vacation, my dad suggested that my mother, little brother, and I go to our hometown for a week. I was ecstatic, and nervous. I would

get to see the place I dreamed of, that made me sigh when reminded of it. At the same time, what if it wasn't what I remembered? What if everyone moved on? I was so removed from myself from two years ago, what if they liked that old version of me better than who I am now? What if they also grew, and as a result we were no longer compatible?

I didn't have time to worry about this because our flight was in two days.

Getting there was weird. I visited places that lived only in my memories for two years. Everything and nothing changed. I hardly recognized the people, and they hardly recognized me.

I got the opportunity to spend a day with my best friend. We had been friends with each other since kindergarten, and despite not ever being in a class together, we were very close.

Our day together was wonderful. We hiked a trail and swam in a cold waterfall. We ran around in the rain, scaring seagulls in a field. We sat together on a rocking bench listening to the waves of a lake ebb onto the rocks in front of us. Despite the distance that had grown between us, conversations came easy. Everything from the last few years of school to books we had read and shows we'd watched; How much we'd missed each other. We got soft-serve ice cream and took pictures.

That was one of the best days of my life.

Coming back from that trip wasn't as hard as I expected it to be. Two nights after I returned home, I laid in my bed thinking about the trip, and I felt peace. Yes, we had both changed, our interests having evolved, but we were both the same kids who talked excitedly to each other about My Little Pony, and Warrior Cats. We had grown apart, but not opposite. Laying in my bed I thought about the past two years and how one week changed how I felt about moving, and about my previous life.

I never really understood when people said that a chapter in their life felt complete, but in that moment, it was clear to me.

Student Name: Brody Campos  
Grade: 8  
School: Grand Lakes Junior High School  
Title: A lonely walk in the forest  
Category: Short Story  
Key: Silver Key  
Educator: Jill Moreno

Why did I agree to do this? Michael thought. He shined his flashlight up and down in the darkness. He continued to walk through the grass. If I can't find him in five minutes then I'm going home. He continued to search looking behind trees, rocks, and bushes. It has been nearly an hour of searching late at night and still nothing turned up. "Charlie! Come here, boy!" Michael said out loud. "Where is this dog at?" Michael asked himself out loud. "Thanks a lot, Jason for asking me to come out here and search for your dog, because that is exactly how I wanted to spend my Saturday night," Michael complained to himself out loud. "Charlie! Where are you, boy?" He yelled again.

"Ugh that's it I'm done." Micheal pulled out his phone. "Sorry Jason but your dog seems long gone." Just as he was about to call him he heard something in the bushes. Micheal looked up "Hello!" He yelled. "Is anyone there!" He walked cautiously towards the bushes shining his flashlight towards it. He pulled out a small pocket knife. "Come out now!" he yelled. Just as he was about to reach out, a small dog jumped out of the bushes. Micheal jumped back in surprise. "Ahh!" Micheal yelled out. He took a closer look at the dog. "Charlie?" The little dog wagged his tail back and forth looking up at Micheal. "Ah, man I've been looking all over for you." He leaned down to pet Charlie. "You are very lucky I found you just now. I was more than ready to leave." Micheal said. "Jason is going to owe me for this one."

Micheal pulled out his phone and called Jason. Michael looked down at Charlie who was simply standing still. He had stopped wagging his tail and was staring at Michael. Michael thought this was odd. This wasn't the type of dog to just stay still, most of the time he would be running around and jumping up at people especially if he was out in the open, but for some reason, he wasn't. Before Michael could think anymore on this Jason picked up the phone. "Hey man what's up," Jason said.

"Hey man, I finally found your dog," Michael replied.

"What?"

"Yeah man, he was way out here but I finally found him."

"Dude what are you talking about," Jason said, sounding confused.

"Your dog. I found him. remember you called me earlier and asked me if I could go out and find him"

"I didn't call you at all today, and my dog is right here," Jason replied

"Alright, stop messing around man. I've been out here for almost an hour looking for your dog."

"I'm not messing with you, I'm looking at my dog right now. Hold on, give me a second."

Michael looked back down at the dog. He still wasn't moving. He was still staring at Michael. Something about Charlie made him feel uneasy. Michael's phone beeped.

"Look I sent you a photo that I took of Charlie that I just took," Jason said. Michael opened up the photo and there he was. It was Charlie. Michael could feel his heart beating faster. He looked back down to where the dog was but he was gone. Michael looked around but he could not see the dog anywhere. "Hey are you-" Jason said

"Jason, are you there? Jason!" Michael looked at his phone and realized that it had died. "No no no not now!" Michael said out loud. Michael looked around nervously. Then he heard a whistle coming from behind him. Michael jerked around. He didn't see anything. "Is anyone there!" Michael said. He heard no response. Then he heard the same whistle to his right. Michael looked to his right and he saw him. He saw the small dog. He was standing still and looking straight into Michael's eyes. This time though the dog was smiling. Michael stood there in shock. The dog's eyes were completely black now. Michael could now feel himself sweating. He took a few steps back. He pulled out his pocket knife. He pointed it at the dog. "Stay back! Don't move!" Michael screamed. The dog simply tilted his head. Michael took a few more steps back keeping the knife pointed at the dog. He stood there for what seemed like forever, but suddenly the dog ran to the left. Michael jerked his head in the direction the dog was going. Michael stood there for a few seconds and then ran in the opposite direction of where the dog was going.

He ran as fast as he could. His legs were starting to burn but he ignored it. He looked around frantically making sure that the dog wasn't following him. I've gotta get to Jason's house Michael thought. Michael kept on running until he tripped on a vine. He fell and hit the ground hard. "Agh!" Michael screamed out in pain as he landed on his arm. Then he heard the whistling again. Michael looked around. He didn't see the dog anywhere but it sounded like the whistling was close by. It also sounded like it was coming from all around him. Michael stood back on his feet. His arm was throbbing now. The whistling stopped. Michael held his breath thinking that the dog would appear somewhere. He waited but he didn't see the dog anywhere. He then turned back around and continued to run.

Eventually, he made it to Jason's house. Michael knocked on the door. He waited a few seconds and then he knocked again. "Come on answer the door," Michael said to himself. Just as Michael was about to leave Jason opened the door. "Micheal? What are you-"

Before Jason could even finish what he was saying Michael ran past him into his house. Jason looked back at him "Hey what are you doing?" Jason asked.

"Close the door quickly!" Michael told him. Jason closed the door. Micheal sat down on the floor and put his back against the wall. He was breathing hard and his legs were still burning. "Hey, what's going on? What happened?" Jason asked

"I was being chased," Michael responded.

"Chased by whom?" Jason asked, sounding worried. Ignoring the question, Michael got up and went to the window. He opened up the blind and looked around. His eyes looked frantically across the street looking for any sign of the dog. "Hey!" Jason said. Michael turned his head to Jason. "Who was chasing you?" Jason continued. Michael took a deep breath. "I don't know what it was."

"What do you mean you don't know what was chasing you," Jason said

"I don't know what it was. It looked like a dog." Michael replied.

"A dog? That's what was chasing you?"

"I said it looked like a dog, but it wasn't. It looked like your dog" Michael said

"It looked like my dog? What are you talking about?" Jason said

"I know what I saw ok!" Michael replied. Micheal sat back down putting his hand on his head. He took deep breaths trying to calm himself down.

"Look how about I get you some water and you just sit and take a moment to yourself alright." Jason left the room and Micheal sat there alone. He looked back out the window. He looked across the street and there was still no sign of anyone. There is no way I imagined all of that. Michael thought to himself. Michael held his arm which was still in a lot of pain.

Jason came back with some water. "Here, drink this." Michael took the water and drank some. "Thanks, man," Michael said. "Hey, is your arm ok?" Jason said, "I noticed that you were holding on to it when I came in."

"I don't think so. I landed on it pretty hard while I was running." Michael replied. "Sorry I came in here unannounced but your house was closer than my house and I just needed a place to stop."

"It's alright man. It looks like you've been through it." Jason said.

"Hey, where are your parents?" Michael said. He had just realized that his parents weren't there.

"Oh, uh there out right now," Jason said

"Really?" Michael said who was now feeling confused. "I thought I saw their car outside."

"Uh, they're out looking for my dog. They're out looking for him in the neighborhood." Jason said.

"I thought you said that you never lost your dog," Michael said. Jason looked at Michael but didn't say a thing. He just looked at him with the same eyes that stared at him in the forest. "You know what, maybe I should leave," Michael said as he got up. Jason immediately got up as well and got in front of the door. "Oh no I don't think that's necessary," Jason said.

"Look, I really should get home," Michael said. He tried to get past Jason but he pushed him back. Michael stumbled back and he tried to go for the door again but this time Jason pulled out a knife. "Sit down Michael," Jason said in a commanding voice. Michael, without any other options obliged. Jason sat down on the chair across from him.

"Who are you? What do you want from me?" Michael asked with a shaky voice. The creature simply chuckled, still pointing the knife to him "Oh nothing from you. It's your father who I want." Michael looked at him with a puzzled look on his face. "My dad?" Michael said. "What could you possibly want from him?" Jason leaned forward towards Michael "I want to watch him suffer. The same way that I have." At this point, Michael had been left with more questions than answers. His father was an incredibly renowned biologist. Why would this thing want to go after my father Michael thought? "You care to elaborate a little more than that," Michael said.

"I'm assuming that you don't know who I am." the creature said. Michael shook his head. "I ain't a dog, I ain't your friend, I'm not even from this planet. I came here seventy-six years ago. My ship crashed and immediately your government was all over it, but I managed to get away. I lived on this planet for years after that. I was found however one year ago and your government immediately locked me away. Next thing I know I'm being studied and experimented on. A whole year I went through that." Michael was stunned. He was talking to an alien. He had always heard people claim that the government was hiding aliens but he had never believed that aliens ever came in contact with us. Now he was looking directly in the eyes at one. The alien spoke again. "Do you know who the person who was at the head of it all was? The man in charge of the whole operation." The alien leaned in closer looking deep into Michael's eyes. "Your dad. Your father tortured me for a whole year." The alien said, raising his voice. "I escaped last week and I wanted him to suffer. And I decided the best way to do that wasn't to kill him. It was to kill the people he loves." Michael felt himself starting to sweat and his breathing getting louder. The alien stood up and Michael leaned back into his seat as far as he could. "So why don't we pay your father a visit?" The alien said.

He walked towards Michael and picked him up by his right arm. In an instant, Michael grabbed his pocket knife and stabbed the alien in the shoulder causing him to drop his

knife. Michael pushed him back and stumbled to the ground. The alien laughed and pulled the knife out of his shoulder. Michael got to his feet not looking away from the alien. "You have spirit boy. I'll give you that" The alien said. He then charged at Michael attempting to stab him. Michael was pushed to the wall and held the knife inches away from his chest. "You want to die right now instead? Fine, have it your way." The alien pushed harder and the knife slowly entered his chest.

Michael screamed in agony. Micheal, with all the force he could muster, pushed himself away from the wall and fell to the ground bringing the alien down beside him. Michael removed the knife from his chest and screamed out in pain. The alien attempted to get up but Michael turned himself towards the alien and kicked him in the face sending him backwards. Michael got up and ran to the back of the house. He turned around and the alien was nowhere to be seen. Just then the lights went out. The entire house was silent except for Michael's heavy breathing. Then he heard a whistle. The same one he heard out in the woods. He held his knife out in front of him. Just then he saw a tall lean figure approaching him from the darkness. The alien. Michael looked to his right and saw a door to the backyard. Seeing this as his only option he sprinted towards it.

He opened the door and ran outside. He turned around holding his knife in front of him. He was walking backwards expecting to see the alien follow him. Instead, he fell backward into a hole and hit his head. Michael started to lose consciousness and the last thing he saw was the alien looking at him from above. Michael woke up and looked around. He was in a small hole just barely big enough for him. The alien approached the hole from above and looked down at Michael. "What is this!" Michael yelled.

"Your grave." The alien responded. "I made it just in case you decided to not cooperate." Michael's heart was racing. This can't be happening. He thought to himself. "Let me out!" Michael yelled. The alien grabbed a large piece of wood. "Oh don't worry Michael. Your father will be joining you soon." Michael looked up as the alien slammed the piece of wood over the hole with the last bit of light disappearing.

Student Name: Colton Wonzer  
Grade: 11  
School: Tomball Memorial High School  
Title: A New Beginning  
Category: Personal Essay & Memoir  
Key: Silver Key  
Educator: Kathleen Campese

I was crying on the inside as I made the decision that dictated my future. I didn't know what to do. Do I choose to make my parents content or fulfill my own wishes? I could feel the tension gathering as the words slipped out of my mouth. The words that announced my final resolution; however, I knew it wouldn't go in my favor.

It was the start of my Sophomore year. Football was starting up, and games were just around the corner. When I heard the words "Colton Wonzer, B team" from my coach, I knew it would be another dreadful and painful year. As the degrading news was read aloud, I could hear everyone's thoughts on how much of a disappointment I was. The smell of the disturbing locker room flooded my head with ideas and prevented me from doing anything but standing there. Am I really this bad? Will I ever make varsity? How will I ever succeed if I am not even superior at what means the most to me? I could feel everyone staring at me as if I was now the center of attention. My body was overheating by the constant generation of tingling from my nerves. I stayed steady as a rock to prevent people from thinking I was hurting, although it was one of the most heart-wrenching statements I have ever received. The games would be frightful, and the practices would be terrible. I concluded that this would be one of my life's most challenging seasons and a turning point.

Every morning was the same: 5:30 AM, alarm echoing through my room as the harrowing thoughts of practice pondered in my head. I spent as much time as possible getting ready, trying to eliminate the ache inside of me. When my dad yelled, "Time for practice," I would always respond with "Hold on!" to delay as much time as possible. Walking down the stairs was a constant reminder of my humiliation. I would be going to practice another day, suffering from the feeling of my favorite sport crumbling from my interests. This was all my fault. If I didn't suck so severely, I would have never made the team of "leftovers." At least that was what the coaches treated us like. All of this internal conflict wasn't even the worst of it. On the way to practice, I would glimpse at all the houses, each symbolizing that I was one foot closer to my agonizing sorrow. When I finally arrived at school, I would always take one final deep breath of fresh air before my lungs suffered from the sour smell of my surrounding teammates, who never washed their clothes. Once we got onto the field, the consistent over-exaggeration of the high-pitched whistles gave me a headache, knowing that I was doing everything I needed to, but my team failed. A

select few teammates and I would give it our all every day to hear the coaches screaming like bloody murder at the rest of the group. I would always turn around and see a group of people running or doing up-downs for failing to complete one drill correctly. When it came time for whole team practice, I would hide behind everyone to prevent myself from having to go in. As the position leaders called out the names of the starting lineup, I would hold my breath, praying that I wasn't on the list, although I always was. Once I went in, I never came out. I would run up and down the field so hard that I could hear and feel my heart about to burst out of my chest. As soon as the words "Family on me, family on three" came out, I knew my distress would finally end!

The crowd was roaring as the game was about to begin. I could see nothing but the bright lights shining down on me as the ball flew through the air for kickoff. As I ran onto the field for defense, I could feel my body shaking from my anxious suspicions. The ball was snapped for the first play of the game. I brutally rushed into the offensive line as the quarterback took a deep pass down the field. The ball beautifully spired through the air as if the game was in slow motion. The opposing team's receiver beat our defender as he caught the ball and ran straight to the end zone. From that point on, I knew it would be a strenuous game. After the first few drives, I quickly got tired and started cramping from dehydration. As soon as the drive ended, I ran off the field, gagging, and threw up everywhere on the sideline. I was left with a disgusting taste in my mouth, as I could hear my coach yelling my name because I wasn't where I was supposed to be. I could barely get out my words, but I told him I couldn't do it any longer. He rolled his eyes and told me to toughen up while finding someone who could do the job. For the rest of the game, I sat there regretfully as wonders shot through my head. Did I just let my team down? Am I not tough enough? Is my coach just manipulating me? Thinking to myself finally opened my eyes to a tough decision.

"I am going to quit football and focus hard on my grades," were the words that aggressively slipped through my tongue. My parents couldn't believe it. Their mouths fell to the ground as I heard a synced gasp. My dad said, "Are you sure this is the right decision, son?" "Yes, I am positive," I responded. I knew my parents were upset because they always told me they enjoyed watching me play; however, I couldn't endure it any longer. For the rest of the evening, my house was silent as if they were mourning the death of someone. I had to deal with the fact that I hurt my parents, which made me upset.

After about a week, I knew I made the right decision. I was no longer stressed. It felt like I had finally released the shackles holding me down. Every time I walked into a class full of my old teammates, I would hear them talking about the appreciative parts, which reminded me of the memories that we had made. Although I did not miss the practices or games, I missed being a part of a team I could relate to and always be around.

Student Name: Camdyn Chaddock  
Grade: 10  
School: Tomball Memorial High School  
Title: All I Have Left with Her  
Category: Personal Essay & Memoir  
Key: Silver Key  
Educator:

578 days

82 weeks

19 months

1 single school year

That is how far apart we are. That is the amount of time she waited for me to arrive...or maybe it was the amount of time I waited to meet her. Or just maybe it was the amount of time we waited to be reunited, my sister and me.

Two months shy of my sister's first birthday my mom and dad were surprised to find out that another baby was on the way. My mom swears that she prayed with every ounce of her, for every second of every day, that that baby would be another girl. She pinky promises that it wasn't because she was selfish and loved having little girls...although I think it was a little bit of that...but mostly because she says she knew what it felt like to walk alone in this world of "mean girls". She knew what it felt like to "have" to play Barbies with your mom because everyone else was playing with their own sisters. And she knew what it felt like to wish at every birthday that you had a sister to curl up next to when the darkness of the childhood night crept into your room.

She got her wish. My sister got a sister!

My childhood memories are so intertwined with hers. One great big, glittery childhood filled with magic, experienced from two separate pairs of eyes but remembered as one singular series of moments. Every memory I have is with her. She doesn't even remember a life without me.

Did you know that most gardeners will tell you never to plant hibiscus plants in one pot because the dominant plant will release a chemical reaction that will kill the roots of the other? Yet, if the seedlings are from the same seed pod and stuck together a rare phenomenon of nature occurs. The plants seem to recognize each other and will not only intertwine their root systems but grow in the exact same manner, at identical speeds. Leaves and branches reaching toward the other as if they are holding hands. Root separation indistinguishable. Woody trunks braided together by Mother Nature. Neither plant will show dominance over the other. Both plants happily sharing the space they were given and blooming in their own unique color but beautifully in sync.

This is us.

When we were younger, people always assumed we were twins, clearly not identical. These days she watches the world from 6ft high with her chocolate meringue pie brown eyes flecked with bits of amber and I observe at 5 inches lower, eyes filled with stormy waves of sapphires. My dad has always said we act as different as we look. She is a "bucket filler", a giver of light, everybody's "best friend" and unafraid of the darkness of the world around her. Her heart sits on the outside, always exposed, as her goal in life is to make others smile even if it leaves her vulnerable. I am more cautious, more skeptical, and more of an observer. I put my head down and do what is asked, "Lead the team. Be the president. Win the game. Be our captain". I guard my heart deep in my chest under layers of protection; except when I see that hers is in the line of fire of some catty insignificant girls' arrows. I will always step in front of any arrow that is shot her direction to protect her and that golden heart.

I already know what you are thinking, "but you are the younger sister, and her job is to protect you not vice versa". C'mon, this isn't a movie, this is real life....and real life is messy. But real life is better. See, she is the true yin to my yang. Yes, I protect her heart because it is exposed but that heart of hers is her superpower. With every beat it pumps blood through her veins and with every beat she gives light to the world but mostly to me. She knows that my kryptonite are the expectations and pressures that sit on my chest and make it hard to breathe when the darkness of teenager's thoughts creep into your room as your head hits the pillow. None of this is from my parents, they are truly the kind of parents you see in the early 90s sitcoms that we watch on Netflix. "TGIF" according to my parents and their stories from when they watched those same sitcoms on Friday nights WITH COMMERCIALS! But no, the pressure doesn't come from them. I wake up every day and pour myself a bowl full of apprehension, unrealistic expectations and anxiety ridden thoughts and one by one I choke them down. But this is where she comes in the room. She takes that light that follows her and turns the spotlight on me,

magnifying the top 3% GPA and the MVP awards lining my dresser. She slowly removes the bowl in front of me and tosses it in the trash reminding me that she is proud to be my sister. Words that can be spoken by adults but seem to mean more when said by her.

540 days.

77.1 weeks.

17 months

1 single school year.

That's all I have left with her. The amount of time I have before she leaves me and goes off to college. The amount of time I have left before my carefully guarded heart shatters into a million pieces.

Student Name: Amelia Sink

Grade: 8

School: Creekside Park Jh School

Title: Back Pain

Category: Personal Essay & Memoir

Key: Silver Key

Educator: Victoria Hagan

I feel a shooting pain going up into my back, like electricity moving through me. Then the pitch blackness envelops my sight. I woke up on the old scratchy gym floor, the bright lights blinding me and my coach standing over me. As I start to attempt standing up, seemingly an easy task, the daunting void of black starts to creep around my eyes once again, urging me to give in.

The day had started just like any other day, just a Friday, with nothing that could go wrong. I was looking forward to cheer practice that night, and I was ready to practice the new skills I had learned last time. I walked into athletics, ready for running today. After changing and warming up, I heard the whistle blow. "GO!" my coach yells. I take off, lifting my feet off the ground and flying through the air. I remember now how happy I felt at that moment. The breeze against my damp skin, wet with the humidity, and my stringy hair sticking to my face. I didn't know or appreciate that this was the last time I was ever going to feel comfortable running for a long time.

With the help of my coach, I finally stand up, but the room is still spinning around me like a tornado. I can feel a sharp pain in my back, but I push through it while my mom sprints over. My coach and mom started asking me questions, worried. I ignore most of them, too focused on fighting off tears that are already streaming down my face. My coach and Mom helped me to the car, and my arm interlinked with each of theirs. "Does it still hurt?" My mom asks once I'm in the car. "No it's fine" I lied to her. If I lie, I can save myself all the questions. If I lie, I can push through it. If I lie, no one will think I'm making a big deal about it. So I lied. These were the thoughts going through my mind at the time. I know now I should have been honest and it wouldn't have gotten worse. A few days later while the pain is persisting, I force myself to admit how bad it is to my mom. Although I fight it, she takes me to the doctor. They give me an MRI and tell me that I have to stop cheering till I'm healed and that I have to wear a back brace. I can feel the burn in the back of my throat, my eyes glassy, fighting the tears I know that are coming when they tell me this. Next, they tell me that I have to go into physical therapy, at least twice a week, to heal faster.

I go to school the next day with a back brace on. I block out the whispers and rumors of people saying that I'm faking it. I block out the look on my athletics coach's face, the look

where I can tell she thinks that I am faking it. I sat out in athletics, watching all of my friends run, wishing I could be out there too. I started going to physical therapy 2 times a week, I have bad days and good days. There were days when I felt like not putting any work into myself, not believing that I could get better, and overall giving up on life. Many days at school I was in massive amounts of pain from sitting down all day, but I didn't tell anyone and tried to do it all by myself. I don't see anything changing so my mom decides to take me to the doctor again. I step into the stark simple room that smells like disinfectant and sit on the thin paper covering the bed. As I sit I feel pain crawling down my spine, but I fight a reaction because I know people are watching me. When the doctor comes in my mom tells him about how I've been doing in physical therapy and how nothing is changing. After my mom was done talking and he asked me a couple of questions, I could see in the doctor's eyes that this was not good news for me. The first thing he told me was that I was depressed and I should be in better environments with encouraging people. Then that day he told me I had two options. The first option was that I could keep sitting around hearing people talk about me, never cheer again and never run again without pain. The second option was that I could start working hard on getting better through water therapy, dry needling, lasering, and more physical therapy. I decided that I was sick of everyone making false accusations, and I didn't want to give up on cheer and exercise without at least a better fight.

Now my days look more exciting, and I had motivation when I thought about tumbling again and getting better in athletics with my friends. Even though some days I still felt like giving up, I learned how to block the thought out and focus on getting better. We tried everything. We first tried water therapy, which I didn't like because it was inconvenient and didn't work very well for me, so we didn't do that again. Next, we tried dry needling. This method was uncomfortable and painful but it helped, so I kept doing it. Twice a week I would go in, and they would stick around 30 sharp 6-inch needles in my back, poking through my skin, to the never that made the muscles twitch. I decided I would push through the pain and do anything to get better. We also tried lasering, which helped temporarily, but eventually, it started hurting again. I kept up with my physical therapy, motivated to do my stretches at home, at any chance of getting better.

Slowly but surely, I started getting better, and I was amazed at the progress I realized I had made. Now 10 months later, although I'm still working through my journey and have not fully recovered, I know that someday soon I will be and that I will cheer again. I know I will feel the scratchy faded blue cheer floor under my fingertips again, and I am proud of that. I persevered when people told me I was faking, and days when I wanted to give up. After my back injury took away my passion for cheer, I stopped giving things my all, and I didn't even try to get better. I gave up on life, with no motivation to keep pushing forward. With no progress to show I didn't feel like I was ever going to get better. Many people don't know the effect that an injury can have on a person's mental health and how people saying you're "faking it" can take a toll on someone's willingness to get better. I hope that

next time you think someone is faking it put yourself in their shoes and imagine the amount of pain they could be in.

Student Name: Carson Lemmer  
Grade: 12  
School: Tomball Memorial High School  
Title: Bam  
Category: Personal Essay & Memoir  
Key: Silver Key  
Educator: Angela Bellows

August 18th, 2020. The day that changed my life forever.

My friends and I were in my driveway playing basketball like we would normally do on any given summer day. It was scorching out, hotter than it had been anyway, so I collectively decided it was time for a water break. My best friend, Isaiah, and his mother had been over at my house that afternoon. I didn't think much of her being on the phone as I walked in until I heard the words, "There is no way he is dead." My curiosity led me to ask what had happened. As Mrs. Riva, Isaiah's mother, turned to look at me I could tell it was something horrific. Once our eyes met, I noticed something. Her eyes began to fill with water like a pothole on a rainy day. I immediately began to feel anxious as thousands of emotions and thoughts ran through my head, thinking what could possibly have been wrong.

Dewan Godfrey was one of my best friends. There are very few people in this world who I would classify as a true pure soul, but he was just that. He was a tremendous athlete, person, and teammate. I remember going to Canyon Point Elementary with Dewan, and all the fun memories we shared on the playground. I remember racing almost everyday and getting in lots of trouble together in class. Dewan and I had a very unique friendship. A vivid memory I carry with me to this day, is when Dewan and I were playing basketball at a church his dad worked at very late at night. I remember everything from that night. I recall us getting into a fight because we were so competitive, and a little immature you could say. I remember not talking on the way home that night, and apologizing to each other at his house when I spent the night because his dad said we were acting like "Woosies." Dewan was like the older brother I never had, and the love we had for each other was the toughest love you could probably find. We picked on each other, but no one else ever could. Dewan had a different type of positive energy that would come off of him, one that I believe people need. I think that is a part of why he was, and is, so loved in our school and community. Dewan had a smile that never went away, and he could make anyone laugh. Dewan had very high expectations for himself, and he always seemed to exceed the expectations his parents and coaches would set for him. Dewan was well known for his athleticism, but he was more than just that to me. Dewan brought so much happiness to those around him, and it was contagious. Dewan was like a ray of sunshine, constantly giving off joy, and brightening everyone's day. He loved everyone and always

treated everyone with so much respect. He was a perfect example of what everyone should strive to be like.

After she told me the news my heart dropped. I thought to myself no way, and refused to believe any of it was true. Mrs. Riva gathered her things and took Isaiah and me over to Dewan's house. The car ride over there felt like the longest one of my life, and my mind was like a highway full of thoughts of whether or not it was true. My heart was beating faster and faster as we got closer to his house. As we pulled around the last corner to get to his house cars were everywhere, and it officially hit us that we had lost one of our best friends. As we parked the car my stomach began to hurt and eyes began to water, as his father, better known as "Wonky", met us as we walked up to his house. As I looked at him he hugged me, and when he hugged me, he let out a scream that I will never forget. It was the scream of losing absolutely everything. Dewan was his dad's ride until the wheels fall off partner, and my best friend. As everyone stood there in the Texas heat, Mrs. Riva decided we should go buy some water to bring back for the people who all lost something special that day. We drove to the store in silence, and no one said a word. It was like everyone was in too much shock to speak. When we got back, there were even more people than before. We laid the water in the center of everyone and slowly people started trickling in to grab some. You could hear the cries of different people, people asking other people what had happened, and then it was like the world went on mute. Everyone's eyes turned toward his front door, and as I stared up at his house from the street I saw two men carrying something. It was his body. They had him covered up with a black blanket, and it was like he was frozen. There were no movements to his body at all, and it was confirmed that my best friend was gone. Seeing him lay there still, I remember feeling two ways. Inevitably, the first was destroyed, but the second was almost like a little bit of relief. All my worrying and questioning stopped, and I now had the answer I had been waiting for. Seeing his body get taken away in that van was the moment I knew one of my worst nightmares had come true.

A few weeks had passed after Dewan's death, and the autopsy was released. The autopsy stated he had a heart defect where the stronger he got athletically the weaker his heart got. Finding that out made me even more sad simply because we played basketball together our whole lives. Eventually, after providing the Godfrey family with some space, my friends and I decided to pay them a visit. We drove over thinking what could we possibly say to his dad, mom, and sister, but the truth is, there wasn't anything to say and they just needed people there to support them through this hard time. I remember going to his house and going up to his room, I saw his old jerseys, pictures of us, and I saw his bed had been left from the last time he went to sleep. The house was quiet and mournful. I remember Dewan's sister, Jazmine, asking me to be one of Dewan's pallbearers. I immediately said yes, not really knowing until later that night what had been asked of me. I recall waking up on the day of Dewan's funeral feeling queasy. I remember my mom and dad dressing nicely, and then out the door we went. As I sat in the back seat I could feel myself breaking out into little sweats here and there. This was

the first funeral I had ever attended , and it had been for one of my best friends. We arrived at the church and walked in seeing the other pallbearers, and Dewan's parents. There were 6 of us pallbearers: Chase, Isaiah, Lance, Ethan, Josh and Myself. While we stood there talking about how we all thought today was going to go, I recall walking over to the doors peaking through, trying to see anything I could. Sooner than later they opened the doors for people to start walking in, as the room filled I noticed something that I thought was very strange, there was a line in the middle. As the pallbearers got escorted to our little section in the front right corner I could tell exactly what everyone was in line for. Everyone in the line was getting their own final words and moments with Dewan. I got up with Isaiah, we made our way over to the end of the line, and then we waited. As we got closer and closer to him I could tell he looked different, all the embalming they had done to him made him look like a totally different person than he was before. Dewan had a very nice suit on, and a fresh hairline he always strived to have. After the viewing the pall bearer's families along with Dewan's went to the burial site where we laid our friend to rest. Since then, not a day has gone by in which I didn't think about him and wish he was still here.

I used to tell people how unfair it was and I never understood when people would say, "He's in a better place now". I always thought to myself "What is better than being down here with your friends and family". I guess to this day I never really got over him passing away, because here I am breaking my own heart writing a conclusion for my memoir of my friend who passed away. Dewan showed me how great life really was with him around, and how life isn't guaranteed to anyone. Losing Dewan felt like a never-ending storm of emotions, but I learned from this that people grieve differently, and everyone heals in their own way and at their own pace. I will forever and always, in everything I do, give my best for Dewan Godfery, or better known as, "Bam".

Student Name: Hailey Minor  
Grade: 8  
School: Creekside Park Jh School  
Title: Canter for the first time  
Category: Personal Essay & Memoir  
Key: Silver Key  
Educator: Victoria Hagan

Under the scorching onslaught of intense heat, I gripped the reins tightly, feeling the searing sun rays pierce through my determination. The colossal beast beneath me heaved, each breath an acceleration to its power, as I urged it on relentlessly. Beads of sweat traced intricate patterns down my face, a testament to the effort I was expending in a desperate bid to keep us going. The struggle became overwhelming, slipping out of my control like sand through clenched fists, until suddenly, I found myself crashing into the earth below, tasting the bitter grit of defeat.

In the midst of scorching summer, the blistering heat outside couldn't dampen my enthusiasm. Eager to embark on a new riding adventure, I donned my riding gear. Just a 10-minute drive away from home, anticipation bubbled within me. Today, I was determined to master the art of cantering—a graceful pace, not quite a full-speed run.

Before every ride, I have to groom the horse. I meticulously selected brushes from my toolkit, each designed for a specific purpose. As I made my way to the back field to fetch my equine companion, I encountered an unexpected obstacle. The rain from the previous day had left the ground muddy, and my shoe got firmly lodged in the muck. After freeing myself, I finally reached my horse, his coat caked in dirt. Securing him to the cross ties, I embarked on the task of grooming. It took several minutes to rid him of the grime, the taste of dry dirt lingering in my mouth and between my teeth. Yet, despite the challenge, my excitement only grew, knowing that this effort was a precursor to the joy of riding.

After quickly grooming him, he shone like a delicately crafted piece of jewelry. I fetched the saddle and bridle, securing them snugly in place. With my helmet on, I led him to the arena, the ground surprisingly dry despite the recent rain. As I mounted, I took a few laps around the arena to settle my bubbling excitement. I knew I had to calm down; horses could sense the sweet tang of enthusiasm exuding from me. When the moment arrived, I began cautiously, maintaining a firm grip on the reins and the saddle beneath me. I started with gentle, short strides, tracing a circle in the arena. My trainer stayed close, holding the lunge line connected to the horse, ready for any unforeseen event. I held my

breath, hoping for a smooth ride, praying that nothing would disrupt this exhilarating experience.

After a few supervised rounds, my trainer decided it was time to set me free from the lunge line. I took a solitary lap around the arena, using the time to collect my thoughts, catch my breath, and hydrate under the relentless gaze of the blazing orange sun. My heart pounded in my chest, and my mind buzzed with excitement and trepidation. Returning to where my trainer stood, she granted me permission to canter on my own, confining the activity to the familiar circle I had traced earlier. Confidence surged within me; what could go wrong in this controlled environment? I initiated with a slow, steady trot, nothing too flashy, just to ease into the rhythm. Then, the moment arrived unexpectedly. My trainer's voice cut through the air, instructing me to gather up and canter. My horse, as if understanding the command even before I did, lunged forward before I could fully prepare. I struggled to rein him in, my fatigued muscles protesting from the earlier exertion. Despite the challenge, I managed to regain control. When I felt ready, I gave him a gentle kick and uttered, "Canter." The exhilarating rush of the canter enveloped us, a harmonious dance between rider and horse, in the heart of the sun-soaked arena.

The canter started smoothly, a gentle rhythm that harmonized with the beating of my heart. Yet, nerves crept in, tightening my grip on the reins and inadvertently urging my horse into a faster pace. "Slow down. Release your legs. Lean back, you're leaning too far forward," my trainer's instructions echoed relentlessly. I was overwhelmed, my attempts to slow down proving futile. It was my first solo attempt, and it was quickly turning into a disaster. With each lap, the circle I traced grew smaller, my trainer's voice urging me to widen it. Desperate, I clung to my horse's mane, my grip tightening with each passing second. Along the way, I lost a stirrup, my foot dancing out of it in the chaos. I felt my balance slipping away, panic setting in. If my face was pale before, it was surely ghostly now. Then, it happened—mid-air, I found myself tumbling off my horse. I reached for the mane instinctively, but my fingers grasped at nothing but air. The impact knocked the wind out of me, and I struggled to regain my breath and composure. When my trainer asked if I was okay, I managed a weak "yes," despite the pain and dizziness. After being helped up and cleaned up, I returned to the arena, my horse patiently waiting.

I tended to my horse, removing the sweat-soaked gear and diligently grooming him until his coat gleamed, free from the lingering dust. After a refreshing hose-down, I led him back to his stall, my own clothes coated in a fine layer of sand that made me feel dirtier than ever before. Each step was a careful maneuver, my tailbone aching from the fall. Once home, I washed away the dirt, the water cleansing not just my body but also my

determination. I brushed my hair until it was free of any lingering grit, refusing to let the setback deter me. This initial stumble wouldn't halt my pursuit. I was determined to conquer it, to transform this challenge into a victory. With unwavering resolve, I persevered. I faced my fear head-on, relentlessly practicing until, finally, the elusive skill became mine. The fear dissipated, replaced by exhilaration and confidence. Now, each riding lesson held a thrilling promise, an opportunity to hone my newfound ability. It became one of the many things I eagerly anticipated, a testament to my persistence and the unyielding spirit that refused to be broken.

Student Name: Elle Harris  
Grade: 11  
School: Tomball High School  
Title: Choosing Grief  
Category: Personal Essay & Memoir  
Key: Silver Key  
Educator:

I heard a soft knock on my bedroom door as my mom's small frame peeked in from the hallway. Her eyes were red and puffy, and she was hunched over as if standing took more energy than she could manage. Still groggy from the early Sunday morning wakeup, I wondered what she needed. I glanced down at my phone as the time read 7:34 a.m. There was one missed text message from the night before, a simple "Love you guys." from my cousin at 11:12 p.m. I knew right then and there that something was wrong. My mom came to the foot of my bed, and with a sigh of sorrow, whispered, "She's gone."

I wept in my mother's arms for what seemed like all too long and not enough at the same time. I knew exactly who she was talking about. My grandmother and namesake, Cheryl (CC) Taylor Harris, had passed away last night. It was not a shock to me. She had been losing a fight with pancreatic cancer for 2 years. However, instead of the expected wave of sadness that I had felt in the past, a numbness settled deep in my core. I was not not sad, but I wasn't devastated.

CC was the fourth family member I had lost in the past 5 years and the third grandparent. I had a black belt in my grief. I knew how to process my emotions, how to permit myself to feel, and how to move on appropriately.

However, I hated that I had to know how to grieve. I was too young to have my childhood ripped away by the harsh reality of death, sitting through never-ending funerals filled with people crying over my family. It wasn't fair. I was the only person my age that I knew had lost a family member. The isolation was unnerving. My anxious thoughts echoed in my head like yelling into a vast cave system. Why me? What did I do to deserve this? Maybe if I had believed in God. Maybe if I prayed. I hated that I had made friends with this evil.

Although my grief is something I have carried and will carry for the rest of my life, I wouldn't trade it for the world. I often think back on memories that I shared with my grandparents, each similar in their death but unique in my memories. Tucked away in the back of my mind, I remember the memories I had with my dad's father, where he and I would take his boat out on the Ross Barnett Reservoir in Jackson, Mississippi. I would rise high on the tattered rope swing and feel the wind in my loose hair. I remember binge-watching every Scooby-Doo episode with my mom's father, and him getting up bright and early to cook us all sausage biscuits and scrambled eggs. In the forefront of my mind, I

can remember watching every HGTV show that CC and I could get our hands on. Going antiquing and designing my childhood bedrooms. It saddens me that that is all I have left. Fragments of lives that no longer exist. They will never see me graduate high school, or college, or get married or have children. They won't be here to design my future dorm room or make sure Netflix still has Scooby-Doo. But their memories will live on in me forever.

Due to my familiarity with grief, I have learned to overcome anything life may throw at me. Whether it takes me 5 minutes, 5 hours, or 5 days, I will be stronger than my hardships. This will help me in college because I know that although I will be missing home and juggling a new environment and a new school, I can understand that this time won't last forever, and I must appreciate the opportunity I have to be here in the first place.

I often think back on this quote by William Faulker, "Given a choice between grief and nothing, I'd choose grief." Even though it has proved to be an uphill battle, I would continue to climb for millennia if I could continue to love and be loved in the capacity I have been so fortunate to experience. My grief has taught me many lessons, but above all else, walk slowly. Enjoy every waking moment, soak it all in, and walk a little slower. I will never take for granted the love I have been awarded and the love I continue to pour into others.

Student Name: Anika Yedavelli  
Grade: 9  
School: Tomball High School  
Title: Dancing On ATightrope  
Category: Personal Essay & Memoir  
Key: Silver Key  
Educator:

A mother's love is an irreplaceable one. It represents being nurtured and cared for, a person who will always support you when you fall, and cheer you on when climbing a mountain. My mom was the definition of supportive, kind, and nurturing, but I never thought her love would outlast her, limit her to my memories, and trap her in the photographs. She shielded me from the horrors that came with the real world and protected my innocence until her very last breath.

Her death was the sacrifice for the person I have learned to become, but I would have never wanted to make that trade. A young child's life is about learning, but at seven years old I learned about the horrors of life and how the beauty of it was a mask to the horrors that it covered. For a month prior she had been in the hospital fighting cancer and my family had been trying to preserve every last moment from her inevitable fate.

April 27, 2017, was originally a break from reality, and I would be painting with my teacher after school. But, in a lesson about flowers, the phone blared a tune that would haunt my every moment. I was told to go to the front office but my heart sank when the phone rang. I ran. I ran faster than ever before trying to hold onto what was still left of life. All the questions ran into my head but when I arrived at the front office I could only ask one. "Is it going to happen?" I could barely speak, and the words jumbled together but my dad was quick to respond, as if I didn't even need to ask the question for him to answer. "The nurses said that she was probably going to and that we should take you out of school." He answered with such composure but my heart was racing, my palms were hot, and I was out of breath but my mind kept running around. Driving to the hospital was a car ride of despair and uncertainty. Every minute we got closer to her room was one less minute in the countdown to her last breath. We ran to her room to catch her final moments, which would be engraved in my mind for the rest of my life. We arrived in her room and as she took her final breaths, my mind was a silent chaos. Tears were pouring down my face, my mind pictured what it would be like, all the what ifs, and nevers that had come true.

My mom taught me how to dance on a tightrope. She taught me how to face my challenges head-on and never lose sight of what I love. So when our tightrope shattered, my heart went with it. I lost more than just my mom, I lost my best friend, my teacher, and my caretaker. Beyond that, I also lost myself. I went down a rabbit hole of pain and sorrow and was lonely. I lost my smile, happiness, innocence, and my heart.

I also feared connections, scared of love and trust and how much they could hurt. I wouldn't let people get close to me, because I feared that I would lose everyone. I was also scared that I couldn't love. Not a day would go by when I didn't regret giving her one last goodbye, hug, or telling her I loved her.

I reminded myself of what would never happen to me, her at my wedding, my graduation, or even holding me as I cried, and instead, I cried for her. The place she used to stand when I got home from the bus was empty, and I was reminded of a love I could never feel again as I saw other kids my age embrace their mothers, daily reminders of my empty heart. I would spend my weekends baking all by myself, applying the lessons that she taught me to the passion that she introduced. The sunsets that we would watch together, became the sunsets I watched for hope of finding her beauty in them.

I stopped living, I simply just survived and wouldn't allow myself to feel anything without her there to feel it with me. Time moved on, and so did the rest of the world, but I was stuck in the hospital room where my world stopped. Memories played like a movie every single day, it was the only thing I could bring myself to think about. Every moment those memories played, tears were quick to follow. I couldn't hold myself together or simply allow myself to feel happy. I felt guilt, regret, and sorrow. But most importantly I lost my platonic soul mate who I believed that I would be able to spend forever with. Forever wouldn't have been enough time to spend with her, and I now needed to learn how it spend it without her.

As time moved on, I slowly started moving with it. I learned how to build more connections with others and learn how to love them. I finally understood how to live and grieve at the same time. A balance of life and death came naturally and I accepted it. I enjoyed the presence of love and loss and welcomed both into my life. I learned that the love I had for my mom became all my grief and that the way I expressed it was my way of telling the world that I loved her. When I finally understood what forever meant, I could rebuild our tightrope. I fixed it with the discomfort of knowing she wasn't on the other side, dancing with me, but with the comfort of knowing that she taught me how to dance on it.

Student Name: Amy Mai  
Grade: 11  
School: Tomball Memorial High School  
Title: Exploring Literature  
Category: Personal Essay & Memoir  
Key: Silver Key  
Educator: Erika Kaiser

I've been a humanities-centered person throughout my entire life.

I remember from the delicate memories of second grade, creating flipbooks took up my free time. Small, post-card-sized printer paper was bound by metal staplers, inscribed with imperfect drawings of princesses, fairies, monsters, witches, talking animals, and dashing heroes. The faces of protagonists would stretch over two pages, revealing rugged outlines of large eyes and the jagged edges of what comprised a nose and mouth. Menacing villains were portrayed in dark blues, purples, and blacks, and squiggles that resembled smoke encompassed stagnant figures.

Page after page, my little booklets contained paragraphs of messy handwriting that hovered above fictitious illustrations. I remember when I showed my mother one of the "books" I had crafted. My most prized possession was a story derived from the latest Disney movie, Frozen, where I composed a spin-off that explored an alternate reality where Queen Elsa was actually the Ice Queen--the evil villainess of winter. The plotline follows Elsa after exposing her magic abilities; Elsa flees to the desolate mountains of the north, isolating herself from her people. She develops a hatred for the people of her kingdom. She develops a hatred towards her own sister. Queen Elsa becomes the Ice Queen by terrorizing Princess Anna's engagement with Prince Hans.

Or that's how my story went.

Adolescent minds regularly do not see the reality most adults perceive.

The veracities of parents are usually corrugated with moral standards.

Adult minds do not realize the influence they possess in the critiques they express.

Yet...

"Very beautiful, Amy!" my mother remarked, flipping through pages worn out by colored pencils. She smiled with delight, excitedly rummaging through the text I had handwritten. Reading through the phrases I had crafted, she exclaimed with amusement at characters she had recognized from the movie.

"This looks like...what's the name...Anna..? No...Elsa!"

“But look, she’s wearing a black dress!” I pointed would. “She’s evil!”

“Troj oi..!” my mother would gasp in her native language. “Tai sao Elsa lam vay?”

Why would Elsa do that?

Now I realize how my creativity in my adolescent years summarized the emotions I dealt with. I had methodically created dozens of little booklets of the same plotline after I crafted my Frozen spin-off: good girl turns bad. The “good girl,” Elsa, isolates herself after dealing with alienation from her own subjects and then lives on to ruin the lives of people she once trusted.

The “good girl,” Amy, isolates herself after dealing with bullying from her own friends and then lives on to get back at those supposed “friends” for all the suffering she endured. For all the sorrow, despair, and anguish an insecure seven-year-old had, creating her own stories helped her deal with the bruises she had adopted.

My exploration of literature didn’t end there.

The COVID-19 quarantine prompted the removal of one of my favorite hobbies: playing the violin.

The companionship of practice was one of the most begrudging aspects of playing an instrument; not only was loneliness an aspect-- but the fact that no mentor was looking over my shoulder to help me improve. The only feedback I received was through critiques from online instruction programs. The absence of social interaction minimized the amount of competition I had and the advancement of my art.

So I began staying at home and began reading.

One of my favorite books at that time was Harry Potter and the Goblet of Fire. Those 700 pages of labyrinthine magic and ultimate perfidies kindled my inquisitiveness in the world of literature.

A week later, on my bedside shelf stood eight new novels, all newly purchased from the local bookstore. Excitement coursed through my veins as I sifted through the covers of the novels, reading each blurb with meticulous attention and admiring the artistry bounding the embellishments.

“Cuon sach dep nhu vay!” my mother claimed.

Such beautiful books!

Isolationism during quarantine is one of the very few things that I talk about in the present. Losing the social aspect of musical performance hindered my progress substantially--a topic that I never reveal to any individuals who wish to understand why I used to be the highest-ranked violinist in my class.

What was I to do when met with such circumstances at that time?

One of my favorite books I read during quarantine was *A Very Large Expanse of Sea*, a novel that illuminated the difficulties of living as an immigrant in a foreign world. The book intrinsically was attractive to me.

Being the eldest daughter of two immigrant parents was incredibly difficult. I navigated through the world with no mentors and no prior knowledge of what was to be expected of me. It didn't matter if I was the best at math, or if I knew how to spell hippopotamus. When one's first language is not English, one is praised for even being in school.

*A Very Large Expanse of Sea* filled in the gaps from what my childhood neglected to teach me. Rather than being told what my parents dealt with when they first immigrated to America, I lived through it from the perspective of the speaker. For then, I had realized that all the disparities I had consumed myself with-- meant nothing in the grand scheme of the universe. For all the talents I had hated myself for failing in--the fact that I could perform them was an incredible feat in itself. For all the grades I wished could've been better--the fact that I could comprehend the questions was an incredible feat in itself. Literature prompted me to realize that feeling lonely was absolutely normal--to realize that not being the best at something as a result of despair--was absolutely normal. I cherished all the late nights I spent consuming the words etched onto paper pages, normalizing that it was acceptable to lose my prospects in music if my mentality could not accompany it.

I continue to thank "the humanities" every day.

For all of my uncles, aunts, and relatives who worked hard and became doctors, who launched a raised eyebrow or a look in disbelief when I told them I enjoyed taking the humanities classes--I understand completely why. English never got any Vietnamese immigrants far in life. But for me-- finding an escape from the conformities of the present and being able to express myself through creativity--was the one thing I have never taken for granted. Being able to have those gifts was a privilege for most people, and every day, I am thankful for the perspective exploring writing gave me.

Student Name: shreya shewale  
Grade: 9  
School: Tomball Memorial High School  
Title: Fall  
Category: Poetry  
Key: Silver Key  
Educator: Melissa Jenson

### Fall

In Fall, the world is like a quilt  
And each leaf is a different burst of color.  
The bronze leaves, like a bird in flight,  
Fall with grace  
The trees shed their summer clothes and  
plump pumpkins smile on front porches  
The crisp and cool air leaves a chill overnight,  
a fog and mist after dawn.  
And when you breathe out,  
a cloud appears  
The smell of cinnamon and wood smoke  
Float throughout the air  
Thanksgiving turkeys are plumped up and baked  
While laughter and bliss spill like wine  
So embrace the fall  
As nature shows its glorious beauty  
In every leaf  
there is a trace of autumn,  
wild and free.

Student Name: Sophie Hong  
Grade: 9  
School: Tomball Memorial High School  
Title: Fear  
Category: Personal Essay & Memoir  
Key: Silver Key  
Educator: Takeisha Woods

"Oh, Appa! It's Emma!" I said to my dad. "Who's Emma?" asked my dad, who was driving me to school. "She's a friend at school." I replied. "Oh, okay. Where is she?" "There! See? That girl wearing the yellow jacket on our left." Emma wasn't exactly hard to spot. After all, it was 7AM in the morning on a weekday; a time when nobody wanted to be up. Therefore, except for a silver SUV and a girl with a yellow backpack, the streets were empty. My dad rolled down his side of the window slowly, as I was in the passenger seat and Emma was on our left. Once it had rolled down halfway, I excitedly cried out, "Hi, Emma!" I waited for a few seconds, expecting her to stop, turn, and happily wave back to me.

One second.

Two seconds.

Three seconds.

Four seconds passed.

Instead of slowing down the slightest amount, she continued walking at her regular pace. She must've not heard me, I thought. I cried out again, "Emma!"

One second.

Two seconds.

Three seconds.

Four seconds passed.

She did not slow down. In fact, she started vaguely speeding up. What in the world? I thought to myself. I decided not to call out to her again, as my efforts were evidently useless. When we finally caught up to her, I waved to her and greeted her once more. She finally turned her head and looked at me. Upon realizing that it was me, she finally replied with a brief but satisfactory, "Oh, hey!"

At school that day, when Emma saw me in the cafeteria, she ran up to me and said, "Oh my gosh. I legit thought I was gonna get kidnapped. I thought that This is the day I'm gonna get kidnapped and The day is finally here." She said this with a certain mocking, carefree tone, so at the time, I didn't think much of it. However, as time went on, I recalled this memory, replayed this moment, and realized the severity of her words. Emma, who was thirteen at the time, believed so strongly that she would inevitably be kidnapped at some point in her life to the point where when her friend pulled up to her in a silver SUV to greet her, she began to fear the black duct tape and harsh ropes that she believed were waiting for her.

Another time, my dad and I were driving to the mailbox in the evening to retrieve our mail. On the sidewalk, a couple of houses in front of the mailbox, there was a mother who was walking with her two toddler daughters, who were happily hopping along. The three of them were all wearing the same style dress; a sundress with sunflowers all over. It was very evident that this was a tightknit, happy family. As my dad and I slowed down the car, ready to get off and retrieve the mail, the mother abruptly stopped walking, looked up and down a couple of times, and put her hands along her children's backs to guide them in the direction she wanted to go. It was evident that she was trying to usher her daughters in the direction that she had just come from, for she thought that, inside the car, were kidnappers who were ready to suck the light and life out of their precious bodies.

This experience, along with many others, have taught me that women constantly bear the fear of sexual assault. As early as the Roman Empire, there have been records of women being assaulted. This problem has lasted for centuries, yet it still exists. Along with this

problem lasting for a long time, there have been shocking ways in which rape has occurred. For instance, in the late 1970s, serial killer Ted Bundy, kidnapped, raped, and murdered around thirty young women. The way he abused them is absolutely horrific, but the method in which he kidnapped them is even more terrifying. He would pretend to have an injury such as a broken arm or leg while having to lift something heavy, such as a stack of books, into his car, a 1968 Volkswagen Beetle. Then, he would ask the young women nearby to help him accomplish the task. Of course, these young women wouldn't refuse to help a helpless person who needed something as simple as putting a few books into a nice car. Then, as the young women were bent over, he would knock them out with a crowbar, stuff them into his car, and drive them away to a private area, where he raped, abused, and eventually killed them.

Women should not have to be afraid of walking alone or hanging out with male friends. We should not have to fear for our lives every time we bring goodness to the world by helping someone do something they are unable to do. This atrocity has been occurring since the beginning of time, and it still hasn't been resolved. Humans are now able to launch a 1,420-ton rocket into space and safely get it to land back on Earth and are working towards inventing cars that can fly, yet we have little to no regulations or protections in place that are made to protect our own kind. There is so much that the world can do instead of waiting for this horrible catastrophe to evolve as it has been evolving, but not enough people are taking the first step.

America, why not take the first step in inventing something that will save the 442,754 women that are raped or sexually assaulted each year? Why not do something that will make thousands of lives so much better? Why not take away a major fear factor for the 3.95 billion women that are living in this world?

There is no reason to keep standing still and not move forward. Don't hesitate. Don't wait. Take the first step to ensure the safety of women all over the world.

Student Name: Mia Romero Bernal  
Grade: 12  
School: Tomball Memorial High School  
Title: Indoors and Outdoors  
Category: Personal Essay & Memoir  
Key: Silver Key  
Educator: Dana McMillan

Many people find that they have certain traits that completely contradict each other, and that seems to be the norm since every person is complex in their own way. Some people are even straight up hypocrites. For me, I find that I have many contradicting characteristics including that I can be quiet a lot of the time but also loud, or that I like being alone but I also enjoy spending time with all kinds of people. A pair that I find particularly interesting is the fact that I am both an indoor and outdoor person.

When choosing what to do for the weekend, most people have a go to option when it comes to staying in and resting or going out for an adventure. When talking about interests and hobbies, they tend to either stick to indoor ones: playing video games, watching tv, reading, listening to music, cooking, knitting, or outdoor ones: playing sports, camping, traveling, fishing, hunting, and so on. Most of the people I've met tend to be this way; my cousin who I share many interests with (we have similar music taste, we both like to cook, we play video games together) despises the idea of camping (the annoying bugs, the sleeping in a tent and not on a real bed, the fact that there's no actual restroom) while I actually relish the experience every time I go. Other times all I want to do is stay indoors all day, resting on the couch while watching some tv.

I've always been indecisive, but my long list of interests makes it exponentially more difficult to pick one or the other. My cousin constantly asks me if I want to hang out, but the truth is I really don't know if I would rather go out or stay within the comfort of my own home. There is a bright side though: when the plans have already been established by someone else, it is easy for me to go along with them because I just love to do everything—from going hiking or biking to watching a movie.

Whenever I listen to songs about being free, rolling around in the grass, and feeling the breeze, which is often, I genuinely get emotional as I yearn to be in their place. I constantly wish I was sitting by a river, listening to the whispers of the water as it flows, all while watching the sun set behind a mountain. The reality is that these type of places are hard to find and they're in fact not what I see when I step outside my house. So I guess it makes sense that when not home, I crave the cozy comfort of my bed and squishmallows.

I will forever desire a life where I travel to a new place every week, taking in the scenery in every landscape I see. I know, though, that this just isn't realistic for me because even though I heavily appreciate nature and its beauty, it's the same for my home and all of the relaxation that it brings me. In the end, I have to live with the fact that my best life will be lived when I learn to balance the time I spend outdoors and indoors.

Student Name: Jennifer Mai  
Grade: 9  
School: Tomball Memorial High School  
Title: Meeting Myself Again  
Category: Personal Essay & Memoir  
Key: Silver Key  
Educator: Janet Stackhouse

The tween years of the pandemic and my junior high were some of the most defining years of my life, making it an immense part of my identity. Of course I had a lot of troubles like anyone going through middle school, but sitting here now in my freshman year, I struggle to recount my experiences in chronological order. Fortunately, I keep 3 journals hidden in my desk that allow me to meet myself again.

May of 2020: I started journaling when I was given a small, blue book as a birthday gift from my cousin. I just turned 11. In the 5th grade, I awaited to meet my 5 best friends again after what I thought was an early summer break for the school year. I didn't know I wouldn't see some of them again in 2 years. One of my first pages states my peaceful last days of 5th grade: I made a tent in the closet and there we watched *Spirited Away*. Afterward, Ba taught me Chinese chess. It is officially the last day of school and that was all I had to say for March 28th of 2020. What I notice is that my summer coming into 6th grade sounded so enjoyable. Almost every day, I chose to practice piano, get better at chess, call my cousins, and play Roblox all day. Although, there were days where I described myself as "unproductive." It's ironic now how I've always been trying to be as efficient as possible even when I had no expectations to fulfill.

The 2nd journal was written in terrible handwriting as my dad bought a bullet journal with no lines from Amazon. For pages on end, I basically do the same things everyday: run, study, piano. On December 5th of 2020, I studied for 3 hours and played volleyball with Timothy (my cousin). When I was done, I watched anime with Tina (my sister). At the end of my entry, there's a carrot that says cheering up Abigail. For context, Abigail was, and still is, my best friend. I remember coming into 5th grade hoping to make new friends and to finally become social. My dreams were answered with me meeting her and others. For the longest time, we bonded in what we found in common but also from confiding with each other. Sometimes, I am surprised by how thoughtful she is and, most importantly, how much she thinks about others, and I feel bad. Because she listens to me but she almost never needs someone to listen to her. I question if I'm there for her enough, but this year, I remember expressing this and she responded along the lines of "I was just thinking the same thing about you." I don't know what little Abigail needed cheering up on on December 5th, but I'm glad I was the one that was there for her.

My 3rd journal has much better handwriting as I got the same type from Amazon and learned to write neatly in it. I started going to real life school again, and I never knew I had so much fun. For some reason, when I'm reading, I cringe at the thought of my awkward self, even though I wasn't really that awkward (I was kinda cool). Perhaps the reason why was because I started feeling more pressure. On April 9th, I had my first terrible day in a while. Nothing was ever this bad in the journals. It reads like this: I hate everything. I hate it. I hate myself for not getting anything done. I did absolutely nothing. I am a piece of useless junk and more... I had an obsession of being productive and working on my goals and not procrastinating and everything. Even when nothing mattered, I still valued working hard even when I needed a break. Now, when things do matter and I am extremely spread out by multiple things, I know that to behave only for productivity leaves no room for humanity. If I cannot even enjoy life when I'm at my most focused, I am doing myself wrong. The beginning of 9th grade, I cursed myself for skipping swim practice. In the heat of getting out of school, I immediately wanted to go home to rest, the day had been exhausting, the morning practice had been exhausting, and I was slightly sleep deprived as always. But when I got home, I did not rest nor did I relax. I felt guilty and stuck because I thought I was lazy. How can I be successful if I cannot even exert the effort to work on the days I feel terrible? This seemed like such a small thing now, but then, I was inconsolable. I was fearful that I would become a lazy student athlete that was a failure. Life continued as usual, and last week I was thinking about college admissions and neuroscience. I realize, as a teen, your brain is pliable yet you can also somewhat control what it molds into. Your center for rewards is still developing, making some of your memories at this time the happiest they will ever be. College admissions, in its nature, is generalizing. It reviews an entire person's life through test scores, extracurriculars, and essays. And although it can't be helped, my lifestyle is focused at maximizing my chances in a somewhat unfair system. I see myself believing that I have to make a non-profit, do research, make all-state, have a job, do community service, and make 1:01 in the 100 freestyle in order to get into a prestigious college. But now, I embrace the prospect that I am young and I am privileged. This is the time where I can make some of my happiest memories (literally), and where I have the time to try so many things. I can allow myself some leniency to breathe and enjoy instead of just working all the time, and my future will not be jeopardized. I hope my past self that was upset can see that she had nothing to be worried about.

Additionally, another thing was worrying me a little. I would say this was the most uncomfortable sentence out of all of them. On May 10 of 2021 I wrote I need to stop eating. I was 12 years old. I really don't remember what I was thinking when I wrote this; it was such a random statement. The only thing I remember was when during the winter I took it a lot more seriously. I really did stop eating. In 7th grade, I remember I desperately wanted to be skinny and good looking. Not just pretty, but conventionally attractive. I saw eating disorders as something far and unusual, not something relatable. That's why I got into the media that supported dieting. That's why I lost 10 pounds in 3 months. It

physically was not that substantial, but it was. I had headaches, I didn't eat when I was hungry, I didn't eat breakfast, I had no energy, it took mental effort to do anything. I was unhappy, and I felt like I was in control when I lost weight and worked out. It was only when I lost the 10th pound I thought maybe I was going a little far, maybe I should stop: I was skinny enough. When my mom told me I need to eat more, that's when I hesitantly felt like it was acceptable to maybe gain some muscle again and to eat more protein. I started to eat more and I never looked back. I got ok with eating a lot. I am so grateful I allowed myself to eventually not care. In a growing body, we need food. In a growing mind, we need support from others to overcome having insecurities.

Well, there is always so much novelty and tragedy I can talk about from my journals. But as I sit here and reminisce, I realize I had a very enjoyable middle school experience with exactly the right amount of drama. But I forgot to mention some of the very very good things I got to see again: falling in love with violin, lazy summer days with cousins, ice skating, froyo with Ashley. All of these experiences have made up the opinions I have, the lifestyle I live, and the things I value. I still sometimes journal and I'm grateful for the many beautiful moments life has to offer, but most importantly grateful for getting through the toughest times life has thrown. As I write, I'm happy I got to remember my past as I look towards the rest of highschool, accepting the good, bad, and ugly of what's to come.

Student Name: Kirk Antonio  
Grade: 11  
School: Tomball Memorial High School  
Title: Memoir Essay  
Category: Personal Essay & Memoir  
Key: Silver Key  
Educator: Angela Bellows

### The bounty of hard work

It was a warm spring afternoon when the list was posted, the list would determine who made the cut for the junior high track team. As I scanned the list of various names, my heart sank. My name was conspicuously absent. I couldn't believe it. All those hours of running, all those laps around the track, all the silent hours of running repeatedly had almost driven me mad seeing that all the work I had amounted to was turned into dust. I was devastated.

I had always been a very passionate runner. I had always felt an indescribable connection, with the track, the rhythmic pounding of my feet against the track, the wind rushing past my face. Running was not just a hobby anymore; it was my escape, my sanctuary. I spent countless hours watching Olympic races on my phone, idolizing the athletes who effortlessly glided across the track, their determination etched on their faces. I dreamt of joining their ranks, of representing my school, and of feeling that profound sense of accomplishment that came with crossing the finish line.

The rejection from the track team hit me hard. I felt like I had let down not only myself but also those who had supported me since my rocky beginning. It was a very humbling experience, a harsh reality check that made me question whether I had been working hard enough and whether my dreams were even worth pursuing.

In the weeks following my failure to make the track team, I found myself in a crisis that would inevitably dictate my future. I could either give up my wish of becoming a track athlete or use this setback as an opportunity to shoot forward. With this decision put ahead of me I realized that all the true athletes in the world are not born; they are made through hard work, consistency, and the determination that they will succeed no matter what.

The following summer, I went on a journey to physically prepare myself for the team that I would later call family. I knew that if I wanted to make the team the following year, I needed to put in exponentially more effort than ever before. I began by meticulously crafting a rigorous training regimen that would push me to limits I never knew I had. The dawn of each day saw me rising with determination, ready to face the track, rain or shine.

I honed my sprinting techniques, perfected my form, and tirelessly worked on building endurance. Beforehand I created a document filled with various different ideas I had in mind to further project my ideas onto myself with various goals like “make a new school record” or “make it to state” sitting silently until the day I eagerly cross it out.

As summer started to close and the school year started to open its doors, I could finally feel myself improving through my noticeable gap in speed with other sprinters, blisters on my feet, sore muscles and gasps for air which were all testaments to the hard work I was putting in. Yet, amidst the physical strain I started to rekindle my joy for running, The winds of freedom hugged my body without a care in the world, and the breath of fresh air took in with every breath.

As track season came along again, tryouts joined along with it, I was ready. I approached the track with a newfound confidence and determination. The rejection from the previous year was still consistently ringing in my head, constantly reminding me how much I've grown over the past year. As I ran I felt myself running faster than I ever did, fifty meters, one hundred meters, two hundred meters, and lastly, four hundred meters, all done in a flash.

The time had come as the coach posted the list of athletes who had made the team. Looking through the short list of names I anxiously looked through, until I had eventually found my name etched among those who had made the cut. Even though I knew I made the team my whole body felt a wave of relaxation hit it. Afterward, I rejoiced with my fellow teammates as I emphatically explained how I couldn't put in words how thankful I am to have this position. It was a realization that hard work truly does pay off, that setbacks are merely opportunities for people to have comebacks, and that success is through resilience.

Joining the track team wasn't just about competing with others; it was a symbol that showed off the transformation and work I had gone through over the summer. I had learned that just talent alone wasn't enough to get anywhere in life, and if I truly wanted my dreams to come true I had to put in the sweat, the sacrifices, and the unwavering belief in myself to triumph above anything that gets in my way.

The moment I adorned my school's track uniform for the first time is etched in my mind like a painting. It was as though the uniform held within its threads the echoes of countless hours invested in the shadows.

Standing before the mirror, I was enveloped by an overwhelming sense of triumph and self-satisfaction. It was more than mere attire; it was the manifestation of the journey that had brought me to this juncture. The countless laps, and the undefinable weightlifting sessions that pushed me to the brink, all were chapters in this covert odyssey.

Reflecting on my very momentous year full of many emotions, I marveled at how my perspective had slowly but surely evolved over time. I had come to finally comprehend

that success eluded those reliant solely on innate gifts. It was the alchemy of unyielding labor and persistent determination. I had clandestinely learned that to seize my dreams, I needed to invest not only sweat but also make sacrifices and nurture an impervious self-belief that could silently dismantle any obstruction.

Over the course of this transformative year, I honed a discreet ability to flourish in the face of concealed adversity. It was through a steely resolve, clandestine resilience, and an inscrutable dedication that I unveiled the enigma of success concealed even within the most unsolvable circumstances. This epiphany became the subterranean bedrock of my journey, a testament to the enigmatic forces of relentless labor and resolute commitment to the pursuit of clandestine aspirations.

Student Name: Solana Prestidge  
Grade: 8  
School: Creekside Park Jh School  
Title: My Favorite Shade of Green  
Category: Poetry  
Key: Silver Key  
Educator:

People would ask

“Are you okay?”

At random times

“Yeah, I’m fine”

Is all I would say

Because I thought nothing

Was wrong.

I would cry late at night

For a different reason each time

- I overshared
- I didn’t talk at all
- I cared too much

“Why are you so insecure about everything?”

I didn’t talk at the lunch table

I wasn’t invited to the party

I would stare in the mirror and

Cry

But I thought nothing  
Was wrong.  
I thought it was normal.

I felt like I was suffocating  
Others with my emotions  
And so I tried to stop  
Mentioning my feelings  
But that heavy feeling  
Followed me around,  
Like a weight tied around my neck.

Each breath was

Heavier  
I felt stuck in my head  
At any given moment  
My inner voice felt  
Like it was trying  
to claw its way out.

I chose to let go of the weight  
I decided to make my head  
A nice place to be stuck in  
With a homely bed in  
My favorite shade of green.

I found hope and peace

within myself.

Within my floral pajama pants

And my silver jewelry

And my pink headband for

Getting ready in the morning

And slowly and achingly

My mind began to heal from

The things I stopped mentioning

Each breath became

Lighter

I make the effort to talk at the table

I make the plans to hang out

I learned how to not compare

And leisurely and quietly

My life began to feel like

My favorite shade of green.

Student Name: Alyssa Parrott  
Grade: 11  
School: Tomball Memorial High School  
Title: Oklahoma has eggs; and I still have grapes  
Category: Personal Essay & Memoir  
Key: Silver Key  
Educator: Kathleen Campese

Ducks don't like it when you throw grapes at them, in all fairness neither would I. Although the summer solstice hasn't yet determined the calendar's change in seasons, the school system has finally deemed it summer vacation. The dreadful period where I scour aimlessly in search of something to occupy my time. Part of the reason why I'm visiting a pond at 6:30 in the morning, throwing grapes at ducks.

The recent summer became my attempt to build a better version of myself. I wanted to stray away from passivity by focusing on the things I care about and maintaining a balance between my relationships with others and myself.

That summer a wonderful opportunity occurred when I called my aunt to inquire how she was. Our small talk quickly led to big plans as I stumbled upon something to do. Now all that was left was to pack my bag, sit in a car for 8 hours, and I'd get to steal a glance of the familiar sign displaying Welcome to Oklahoma.

Road Trips are exhilarating, there's nothing that can exceed being stuck with your thoughts and two 5 year olds playing puppies in the back seat with nothing but the song 7 Years playing on a loop. That, I truly mean. Staring out a car window, staring at a pond, and staring at empty Google Docs are all meaningful pastimes to me. It's the most efficient way to deeply reflect on myself and avoid the present. Unless I'm being interrupted by my cousin asking me if Oklahoma has eggs, he was quite bewildered when I confirmed to him that Oklahoma does, in fact, have eggs.

In Oklahoma we celebrated my cousin's birthday. A thoughtful act on my aunt's behalf was to invite another girl my age in hopes we'd provide each other company at a celebration full of young children. Quickly I discovered that I find it easier to dislike than like new people. She came off rather strong with her bombardment of questions, questions which steadily became overwhelming, to try and slow it down I began to make it appear as if I'd lost interest. In my eyes I had successfully avoided any further conversation.

My aunt had overheard most of our interactions and wanted to talk to me about it to understand how I was feeling. She shared with me that some of my responses were quite harsh and wanted to figure out why I became distant in that setting. One thing led to

another and the dam burst, not of tears, but of all the things I had tucked inside. That conversation was the first time I had ever opened up about my life; my aunt told me she prays for me every day.

I spent so much time with my aunt that June that my father wouldn't let me see her anymore. To occupy my time I would spend my early mornings with the ducks, to their relief, grapeless. In search of more neighborhood ponds, I dusted off my mother's old bike and rode through my mornings with the goal of ten miles. I needed things to do. I wanted to understand things from the perspective of a baker, artist, and musician. I wanted to discover how I could compile the things I've learned into a completed product I'm proud of. I wanted to continue pursuing my hobbies because of the enjoyment I found in their outcomes.

The end of July hints at the arrival of a new school year, the yearning for cooler weather, and something to do. During a phone call with my grandma she invited me to join her on a thrifting excursion where we'd travel from store to store in search of the few special pieces amongst the ordinary. The fulfilling moment of discovering a unique item made the aching pain in my feet worthwhile, as was the valuable time I got to spend with my grandma.

With a successful haul from the day and my notably low shopping stamina easily bested, my fatigued self was shocked to hear from my grandma that my aunt had invited my family to go to Galveston. It would have been nice to go on that trip, but my father said no without my knowledge because in his eyes it was "too hot outside," nothing but another one of his excuses. My grandmother advised me to begin asking questions and figure out why he decides to stunt me of opportunities to spend time with someone who actively wants to see me. I must try to understand that he is having difficulties of his own, and that his difficulties reflect on my complications with him.

No matter how hard I attempt to fix myself, it's futile because I can't fix others. What I can do is note that the insignificant things such as eggs and grapes are the results of a greater picture, leaving me to appreciate the significance of the seemingly insignificant moments. Maybe visiting ponds is just a form of escapism, and so are my hobbies, but for now the ducks are safe from what they see as a maniac throwing grapes at the crack of dawn.

Student Name: Ryan Webster  
Grade: 12  
School: Tomball High School  
Title: Roaring Robots  
Category: Personal Essay & Memoir  
Key: Silver Key  
Educator: Paul Nimon

Amid the deafening roars of the robotics competition, I sped across the field, weaving in and out of other robots, when I suddenly heard a loud CRASH. I squinted my eyes, trying to better understand what had happened, when I felt my heart drop. The once beautifully machined gripper now resembled a bunch of Twizzlers.

Once the competition had concluded, the team circled up to discuss possible solutions. Suddenly, Gabe blurts, "Ok, hear me out, replace the whole gripper." Usually, this wouldn't be an outrageous plan. However, we had only three days until our next competition, making this plan seem impossible. Despite this, I agreed to take on the challenge. Next, we began loading everything we could fit into my car, and eager to begin working, I sped home.

After unloading and unpacking, I looked at the robot and felt my brain start firing on all cylinders. Everything that needed to be done began bouncing back and forth in my head like a game of ping-pong. It was then I took a closer look at what had been left of the gripper, and the reality of the situation had begun to set in. What once was a simple few bolts to remove had morphed into an absolute nightmare to disassemble. I looked at the gripper, thinking of alternative methods to remove it. Then, a light bulb went off inside my head; I grabbed the angle grinder off the table and began chopping away until I could access all the bolts needed to disassemble everything.

After removing that last bolt, I glanced up to see that the clock had shifted from PM to AM. Panic began to set in as I frantically began cutting the parts for the new gripper and starting to assemble them. Every few minutes, looking up at the clock like a doomsday countdown. Mere minutes after the clock had struck four AM, I tightened the last remaining bolt. I looked down at my hands, stained with grease and blood, and felt a wave of relief wash over me as I stepped back to see the beautiful creation before me.

While I faced many challenges that night, I learned invaluable lessons that will help shape my future and provide a foundation to excel in everything I do. That night taught me the importance of hard work and showed me that anything is possible if I am willing to work for it. Because I was willing to work hard that night, we could make the changes we wanted, ultimately allowing us to qualify for state. Furthermore, that night also showed me the power of grit and determination. Despite everyone's skepticism, I believed in

myself and was determined to finish it. However, the biggest takeaway from that night was deepening my problem-solving abilities. While disassembling the broken gripper, I had to think outside the box and devise alternative solutions to remove it, as the original methods wouldn't work.

That night had a monumental impact in shaping who I am today, pushing me to become more involved in the team and sparking my desire to join the team's leadership. This would result in me running for and winning the position of robot captain moving into my senior year. As robot captain, I want to leave a lasting impact on the team, using the skills and knowledge I obtained that night to push the team to excel years after I'm gone. However, this impact reaches beyond just robotics. The knowledge I gained has helped me in all aspects of my life, from allowing me to excel in competitive programming to grinding out long essays. Hard work and determination have far-reaching benefits that will help me to excel in college and beyond. During this time, I want to leave a lasting impact on everyone around me, sharing the knowledge I gained that night to help them weave through life at high speeds.

Student Name: Parks Spry  
Grade: 11  
School: Tomball High School  
Title: Silence  
Category: Short Story  
Key: Silver Key  
Educator: Paul Nimon

A water drop persevered down a stalactite hidden in a cave under the beating Utah heat. This silence was as loud as it could be before being interrupted by the sounding of the drop. The silence remained for eternity before another drop came once again. It almost seemed as if this silence should've ended yet it never did.

"Ring-g-g," a tsunami of students were released out the doors as they rushed to get their summer plans started. Gabriel Hoffman confidently strutted out the front doors where his tall frame helped him to gaze over the crowd until he spotted his childhood friend.

"Alex!," Gabe hollered across the flowing river of heads to meet his bro, both wading through the crowd to meet.

"H-how's it going man, ready to start summer?" Alex Hamill managed to quickly stutter.

"I'm hyped bro, you need a ride home?" Gabe offered while squinting his eyes.

"Y-yeah, th-the car's still in the shop," Alex answered.

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Gabe and Alex drove to their favorite spot to grab some sub sandwiches and fountain drinks to beat the deep Utah heat.

"N-Nothing beats Sammie's Subs," Alex managed to get out before stuffing his face with another bite of meatball sub.

Gabe's confused look remained since he heard Alex stutter.

"Yo, I thought you got your stutter fixed a couple years ago. What's going on?" Gabriel questioned.

Alex finished his mouthful of sandwich, "I-I-I don't know man. My parents have just been so t-tough on me these past few years and now that we'll be st-starting new lives in college, I guess I'm just a little scared." They both sat there in silence for a few moments as they thought about what they'll be leaving behind.

Gabe took another sip of his sugary soda before speaking, "Hey we're gonna be fine bro, it's just another chapter of our lives, and I think I know the best way to start it off."

Gabe and Alex sat in the booth looking at a map of Angel's Landing, one of the most dangerous hikes in the world. The crinkled page had been haunting Gabriel's mind over the past weeks as he thought about the journey.

"Are you s-s-sure we can do this?" Alex asked while examining the trail.

Gabe quickly answered, "Yeah why not? We can tell our parents we're spending the night at each other's house, and do it at night. What could go wrong?"

Alex considered the offer and soon after his eyes lit up. "Let's do it," Alex stated without a stutter. Gabe drove Alex home, then drove only a couple houses over to his own.

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"Hey mom!" Gabriel yelled across his house. Gabriel's mom, Tammy, had just finished the dishes after a 10 hour shift at the hospital.

"How was your last day sweetie?" Tammy asked.

"Just glad it's finally over," Gabe chuckled out with a sigh of relief. Gabe had finished snacking after a long day, before finding a good chance to ask his mom a question. Gabe took a deep breath, "Hey, what trail did we lose dad at a few years ago."

Tammy closed her eyes in preparation to reminisce over their family tragedy, "Yes, it was a hiking trail called Angel's Landing." They both sat in silence before Tammy had questioned Gabe, "Why do you ask?"

"No reason, just wondering," Gabriel had swiftly replied.

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Later that night Gabe and Alex had both asked their parents if they could stay at the other's house. Their plan was in movement, and this was only the beginning of a life-changing voyage. Gabe hopped on his bike, and Alex did the same to meet at the mailbox halfway between their houses.

"Alright man, here we go," Gabriel announced to what seemed like a crowd of people, yet it was only him, Alex, and the silent night. They began pedaling to the behemoth of a journey ahead of them, and got there within an hour as it wasn't that far away from their house. The stars above them passed overhead as the adrenaline started to build within each of them.

"Finally," Alex stated out of breath, at the opening to the trail, "We made it." The juggernaut of rock, grass, and trees stared them down as they looked up at what they

have gotten themselves into. "You r-ready for this?" Alex wondered while seriously considering a way out of these next few steps.

"Hell yeah!" Gabe said as he confidently stepped upward.

The first 10 steps were the hardest for Alex, while Gabriel took in the beauty around him. A bush ruffled with quick movement, and a dark figure dashed across in front of them. A loud silence fell among them as they both stepped back.

"W-what was that?" Alex whispered with fear in his eyes.

Gabe slowly stepped forward before chuckling as he got close with the figure. "It's just a cat, man," Gabe stated with a smile on his face. The black cat remained as if it were a statue. Its yellow eyes stared at them as they regained their breath before darting off into the night. "Damn, you ready to keep going," Gabe asked while looking at the confused yet slightly fearful Alex.

"Yeah man, th-th-that was weird," Alex responded.

They continued walking as the trees and rock rose with them up the mountain. The boys took in the nature that seemed to cage them in. With each step many small pebbles, which had been sitting on those trails for decades, were kicked off to tumble down the mountain.

"This is what it's all about," Gabe began to announce. It seemed as if the sky was filled with the rest of the universe to shine on Gabe and Alex. Alex put his arms behind his head to view the heavens around them, and Gabe began to step back. Time slowed as they looked out, and a slight crackle was heard. Alex turned to look. The sand under Gabriel's shoe started to slip. Gabriel leaned toward the cliff behind him and all Alex could do was watch. Gabe was tumbling down the thickets of bush and rock, and a tree aggressively stopped his body.

"Gabe!" Alex screamed as he began to strategically slide from rock to rock to meet Gabe. His scream cut through the silence of the night and it hit Gabriel's ears as hard as the tree had.

"Ughh, I'm good man, I'm good," Gabe groaned as he carefully sat up.

"What the hell were you d-doing bro, pay at-attention!" Alex lectured his friend. Their hearts began to settle, and they both got to their feet. The silence gradually restored its sinister hush as it took them both several moments to realize everything was okay.

Within that silence, another, unexpected voice rang out. "Hello..."

The old fragile voice had struck a chord in the boys like lightning. "Are you boys alright?" it hollered out again. Alex and Gabe just stared deep into each other's wide open eyes.

Fifty different emotions were passed between them before Gabe answered out wearily, "Yes." A shadowy figure strolled up on them from the top of the trail with the crackle beneath each of his shoes getting louder and louder as his wrinkled and overgrown face came into light.

"Good, I heard that fall. It sounded like it hurt," the man answered with relief. The next few moments of quiet felt like days of time. "What are you boys doing up here at this hour anyway?" the primal face questioned.

"W-w-we were hiking," Alex responded with a dead look on his face.

"Don't get too worried now. I live here," The man chuckled as if this experience had happened to him before.

"You live here!" Gabe alarmingly asked.

"Yes sir, come on I'll show you," the elder strolled off back into the dark.

It felt as if this figure had been conjured from the dust in the night, and now Alex and Gabriel were following him to his home.

"What are y'all's names boys," he casually asked.

"I'm Gabe," "I'm Alex," they responded while viewing the man's steps.

"My name is Ivan Desdemona," he let them know. "I had a similar fall to you Gabriel," Ivan stated, "I fell down the cliff but hit my head on a rock." The boys didn't respond yet they still followed Ivan to his destination. "I woke up lying on the ground in the middle of the night with almost know memory of my life before," Ivan continued.

"What happened next?" Gabe hesitantly wondered.

"Well, the night sky laid above me, and over the next hours, I guess it told me my name and other bits of information. Many days passed where I hid in these woods, until I realized I needed shelter. A cave called out to me, and I've lived there ever since." As the men talked, the miles passed without them noticing and before their eyes laid that same cave. "Here we are! Home sweet home," Ivan announced.

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The midnight cave was only lit from the moon's reflections off of the men. Stalactites dripped water from the ceiling and each drop echoed around the cave. Primal furniture was placed around the cave, and a leaf-filled pile laid as a bed, held together by twine and tree fibers.

"Take a seat," Ivan said enthusiastically as he pulled out tree stumps from under the rickety table in the middle of the dark cave. The boy's bodies slightly shook out of fear as they did what the man said. Ivan pulled up a chair and sat with them. His overgrown

facial hair was made clear to them, and his face almost seemed as if it was melting off of his skull. This need to be indented? “Y’know one thing I do remember about my past life is my son. He was so young and full of life.” Ivan took a deeper look into Gabriel’s face. “He kinda looked like you to be honest,” Ivan stated while Alex looked around the cave.

Alex took in every last detail of this cave, then sat up to get a closer look at another room. “Where are you going boy,” Ivan almost aggressively barked at him. Alex and Gabe’s eyebrows rose when they heard this.

“I-I-I’m just taking a look around,” Alex responded.

Ivan’s gaze softened, “Don’t worry about any of that now. Let’s go to sleep to get a good night’s rest.” Gabriel and Alex’s suspicion and confusion grew, yet Gabe aimed to remain positive.

“C’mon let’s just go to sleep Alex, we’ve had a long day” Gabe requested.

“Alright you’re right,” Alex accepted, yet his intrigue stayed as he drifted to sleep.

As they laid in this empty cave, the drips still yelled out in the night like the screech of an alarm or the perpetual scream of a ticking time bomb. to all three of them. Alex awoke with a heavy breath, and he looked around the room. Ivan laid in a deep sleep and Gabe was seen rotating on the ground to get comfortable. The dead of the night still lingered about them as Alex began to get up. He was pulled toward the room that initially intrigued him and he crept inside. All of his greatest fears could’ve never compared to what was in front of him. The blood stained rock walls surrounded him and the bones of many men flooded the floors. Alex’s heart didn’t beat for what seemed like minutes.

“G-G-Gabe!” he screamed. The little light that entered the room was blocked off by a boulder so that the only thing left in the room was Alex, a crack of light peeking from the bottom of the boulder to outline Ivan’s hunched body, and the dismembered carnage. Ivan slowly crept toward him just as he had when they first met him.

“I told you to stay put,” Ivan barked while Alex stumbled back and slipped on a femur bone. The shadowed outline of Ivan revealed a long knife-like weapon, “You should’ve listened A-A-Alex,” Ivan teased. Ivan lunged at Alex, brutally slashing into Alex as fountains of blood covered Ivan’s face and the walls.

With one last moment of consciousness Alex was able to shout out, “RUN!”

These words cut through Gabriel’s ears as he shot up with his eyes wide open. He got off the floor and looked around as the shadowy Ivan strolled up to him. “Where is Alex?” Gabe frantically questioned.

“Don’t worry about him Gabriel. It’s just you and I now,” Ivan answered with an icy smile.

“Where is he!” Gabe screamed at Ivan.

"Alright I've had enough of this attitude from you for one day." Ivan announced. Ivan threw a rock at Gabriel's forehead which began to make the dark night much, much darker.

Gabe's eyes slowly blinked open while he laid against a wall. Disoriented, he looked around a dark cave that he had never been in before, and was met with dark red walls and was sitting in a pool of thick crimson blood an inch deep. His fear rose, as he noticed the hundreds of bones sitting in the same blood he was.

Ivan's dark body stood over him and began to speak, "Y'know when I first saw you boys something was awakened inside of me. As I had told you before I almost had no memory of my life yet once I saw you my memory was sparked and I had a revelation. My son's name was Gabriel as well. It's supposed to mean 'Hero of God'. Well God did this to me. He took my life away from me and you are the only thing he left me with. So I decided to take matters into my own hands... You look just like you did from the day I left." Ivan gestured toward Gabe's body. Gabe looked down at his arms and legs which had been mauled and cut in half. Gabe's initial reaction to this was almost stoic. There were no thoughts in his mind other than anger. Ivan began to laugh, "You were much shorter then."

"HOW COULD YOU DO THIS TO ME?" Gabriel screamed.

Ivan was laughing hysterically while the severity of the situation set in for Gabriel. He could barely move and began to struggle yet all he could do was splash blood around. Gabe began to wail in pain as Ivan continued laughing harder and harder. Within moments of his mad laughing, Ivan began to cough and stumble. Ivan grabbed his head and groaned in pain between coughs. He stumbled back and slipped on a finger. Gabriel watched all of this happen with pain growing all around him. Ivan's stroke led him to fall back onto the corner of a sharp rock where his skull cracked open and spilled blood. Silence then fell amongst the cave except for the same drops of water that Gabe and Alex heard when they walked in.

The tears and cries of Gabriel Hoffman suffocated the room for what seemed like decades. Guilt followed when he thought about what he had done to his and Alex's futures and their family's. Images of Gabe's childhood when he had found out his father was gone flashed through his mind. He remembered reading about Angel's Landing, and that "only an angel could land on it." Only moments past before the yearning death had killed Gabriel just as it had killed Alex in the same way. It seems they were right...

Student Name: Madelynn Mulig  
Grade: 10  
School: Tomball Memorial High School  
Title: Social Creatures  
Category: Short Story  
Key: Silver Key  
Educator: Mariana Hill

Humans are social creatures. At least, that's what they always told me as a kid. You know, those lectures with the counselor that schools would always do? I heard that phrase growing up more than almost anything, because my mother was one of those counselors. I believed it, too. I went my whole life thinking that social situations were a necessary sacrifice, even if it made me uncomfortable. Have you ever really thought about how weird hugging someone is? You just press your body into someone else's and wrap your arms around them, and it feels like you're strangling them and they're strangling back, but who cares because "humans are social creatures!" As a little kid, I tried to be social. I would throw myself at strangers and since the strangers were also young they'd throw themselves back. But that only lasted so long, everyone around me grew up, and eventually I lost interest in the whole social creatures thing.

My teenage years were the worst. Mom always thought that I needed to get out more, so she forced me to go to clubs and participate in sports and other extracurriculars. Of course, I never made any friends; honestly, I don't think I spoke more than a handful of words. People started calling me mute, and then the rumors began. They said that at I had cut my own vocal cords, I had gone through some crazy trauma, I had thrown out my voice screaming. The truth is, I just had nothing to say to them.

Eventually I graduated and got my own place that was a few hours away from my mom. It was a small studio flat apartment, with a couple neighbors who, thankfully, were equally reclusive as myself. Every now and again, I'd walk over to ask them to turn down music or ask to borrow some batteries, but that was about it. I had a stay at home job as a graphic designer, and thank goodness for at-home food delivery services. I left my house maybe four times a month, at most. Of course, my mom found out and threw a fit because, of course, "humans are social creatures!" And that meant that I had to bring my neighbors a plate of cookies she'd made.

If I'm being entirely honest I almost just kept the cookies for myself and lied to her, but when I thought about lying to my poor mother I just couldn't. So I washed my best shirt, frantically scrubbed my face clean of coffee and leftover waffles, brushed my hair, and walked over to my neighbor's apartment. The entire way, I repeated my mother's mantra in my head. "Humans are social creatures, humans are social creatures," I found myself whispering. My face flushed as I stopped immediately. Was I really so socially inept that I talked to myself? I raised my fist, breathed deeply, and knocked on the door twice. To my surprise, it drifted open.

Was it ethical to walk into my neighbor's apartment without even knowing their name? Probably not. Did I do it anyway? Yes, I did. I pushed the door open softly, worried something was wrong. "Hello?" I called out, my voice cracking from stress. I heard a quiet, pained groan from the living room, the hallway floorboards creaking as I made my approach. "Hey, is everything ok? I, uh, I brought cookies," I held the plate of cookies up to no one in particular, before continuing. "It's your neighbor, from across the hallway?" When I made it to the sitting room, I dropped the cookies. The smell in the room hit me like a baseball bat, and I almost lost the cookies I'd snuck earlier. My neighbor was slouched on the couch, surrounded by drool. Her eyes had glazed over, dripping with pus, the veins visible on her face having turned dark and protruded. Her body looked swollen with bloat, her skin had a faint yellow and brown tint. Her lips had blackened, and if I looked close enough I could see what might've been rotting around her eyes. I took a few steps towards her, wondering if she was really dead. I saw ants crawling around her face, going in and out of the rotting gashes in her neck. The insects moved around, crawling in and out of the holes, carrying decaying, fleshy chunks. She opened her black, cracked lips, a flood of drool pouring out. "Help me," I heard her whimper. My body fell backwards onto the hardwood, terror flooding my veins. She wasn't dead, but she couldn't possibly be alive.

I'd seen a dead body once, at my grandmother's funeral. Her eyes were just as glazed over, her skin sharing that faint brown. I could barely look at her, she was already so rotted. Funerals were weird like that. You dress up a decaying corpse and slather makeup everywhere to hide the decay but when you've known someone your whole life, you notice. But I hadn't known my neighbor her whole life, I didn't even know her for part of it. "Help, please," she uttered, more drool pouring out of her mouth. That did it, and I threw up right on her nice blue rug. After I'd wiped my mouth, I ran. I ran far and fast. Out of my apartment building, straight into my car, and drove all the way to my moms. When I got there, I threw myself into her arms and began sobbing. She listened to my story, and insisted we go back together and see if I was making things up. At first, I refused. I would rather die than see that horrible image ever again. But she insisted, and I eventually caved.

There was no talking on the drive back. I was too busy fighting off the images of what I'd just seen. My mom kept giving me glances of sympathy, followed by a pat on the back. When we finally arrived, I had to force myself out of the car. She slowly followed behind me up the stairs, down the hallway, and to the left. There it was. The door was still ajar, I hadn't closed it in my exit. She seemed to be waiting on me to go in, but I stood firm. She entered slowly, with a concerned expression. Suddenly, I heard her ear piercing scream. I rushed in, worried that I'd see something worse than before. My mother was shockingly close to my neighbor, almost as if she was trying to comfort her. "The poor girl," she trailed off, looking wistfully at her. "Please... help," the girl whispered again. My mother's face was overcome with shock, before she quickly got closer. "Of course, sweetie, what happened? How can I help?" She placed her hand on the girl's rotten, yellowed arm, speaking softly and gently. My stomach did cartwheels seeing her touch my neighbor. My mother was a caring, gentle woman, who would do anything to help anyone. I guess her kindness extended to living nightmares. The woman opened her mouth to speak, a centipede crawling out along with pools of drool. My mother recoiled in disgust, before gently squeezing the woman's arm. The flesh bleached from her soft touch. She stood up and walked over to me.

"It's too late for her. I don't get what's wrong, but it's nothing we can fix." She sighed heavily, before continuing. "We should call the authorities." Immediately, I shouted. "What if they think we did something?" Really, I was more afraid of having to talk to them. Socializing with police was always harder than talking to normal people. My mother began to reach out to me, but I shuffled backwards. She'd just touched my neighbor, the living corpse, with that hand. "Call them if you want, Mom. Just, please, don't involve me," I left quickly, ignoring her protests. I felt awful for treating my mom like that, but I just couldn't be in there any longer.

Weeks later and I still hadn't heard from my mom. At this point, I was barely sleeping at night. If the haunting images of my neighbor's undead corpse weren't enough, the stress of my mother's absence definitely was. Sleep was impossible. Finally, I went to check on her. When I got to the house, her car was in the driveway. I peeked through the window at the door and I saw her hand, covered in rats, and some of her long, dark hair on the floor. I quickly began rifling through my purse for the keys, fumbling with the ring until I found the right one. Shoving it in the door, I was already twisting the knob. The door slammed open. "Mom?" I called out. Her swollen yellow hand twitched, causing the rats to scatter from her rotting hand. They had already masticated the skin from her arms with their disgusting little teeth. She slowly turned to grab the ground and pull herself forward. It was then I got a better look at the holes in her arms. Ants and spiders crawled in and out, I could see them scavenging around desperately under her skin for whatever food they could find. Panic overtook me, and I raced towards her. She looked eerily similar to my

neighbor, except she could still move. Slowly, but she was definitely moving. “Baby, help me,” she pleaded, reaching out to me. As she spoke, I saw her slimy, reddish-brown tongue, spit flooding out and around it.

I had never seen something so terrifyingly grotesque. “It hurts so bad, please just make it stop,” she croaked, still trying to grab me. I backed away some, before breaking into a sob. We sobbed together for what felt like hours. Finally, I grabbed her decaying, infested hand and stood her up and moved her to the couch. I turned on the news, plopped next to her, and watched TV.

That was months ago. I’m still in that exact position. I can feel my skin peeling. The ants writhe within my flesh and the rats feast on my exposed sinew. I can feel my body bloating. I can’t move anymore. Mom hasn’t moved in weeks. I can only hope she’s dead. If I knew how to end this suffering, I would. And the news reports, oh the news reports. What happened with my neighbor was just the beginning. Deer hunters everywhere suddenly were found as living corpses, unable to move and drooling uncontrollably, their bodies infested with bugs and yellow fat exposed to the world. They’re saying it spreads through touch, which makes sense. You can carry it for about a week, the only symptom at that time is excess drooling. Then comes fatigue, then your entire body shuts down. You’re forced to die while you’re still alive to witness it.

Despite the countless warnings they’ve issued, people don’t believe them. I’ve seen news feature after news feature of the rotting bodies of people who thought they were above the disease. You know, it’s funny. The scientists say that the cases would lessen if people could just leave each other alone for a few weeks, but I guess you know what they say.

Humans are social creatures.

Student Name: Haania Atif  
Grade: 9  
School: Tomball Memorial High School  
Title: Tea Party  
Category: Poetry  
Key: Silver Key  
Educator: Janet Stackhouse

"Grandmother," I say, twirling Charlotte's thick curls with my finger.  
"Please wake her up. I'd like to play now."  
Grandmother takes my hands in hers.  
She looks up, her wrinkled cheeks wet with tears.  
Trying to avoid Grandmother's expression, I look at Charlotte's pale face.  
"What an ugly yellow her eyes were."  
Grandmother stands up and takes me out of the room.  
She closes the door, despite my protests.  
"Not fair," I say. "She promised to have a tea party with me."  
Grandmother tells me, ever so gently, "Dear child,"  
She stops.  
"Charlotte cannot play with you anymore."  
My brows curl into a frown.  
Then I storm off.  
I hear Mother crying in the barn.  
I peek through the broken door.  
"Mother," I say, "Would you please have a tea party with me?"  
She turns to me.  
"No, dear." She says.  
Then she tells me to go and finish my chores.  
My apron blows in the wind.

When did the cold arrive?

Where was the heat and the mosquitoes?

The odor and the foul air?

The wagons filled with the dead and the yellow on the doors?

Nevermind that.

I'd like to have the tea party I was promised.

I sit on the stool used to milk the cows, my long, dark hair blowing in my face.

Then I go inside.

I walk through the empty hallways and stop in Charlotte's room.

Grandmother is gone, so I walk inside.

Mother would scold lazy old Charlotte for still being in her night suit.

I skip around her new bed singing, "Ring Around the Rosie."

How unfair she gets something new, I think.

I grab Charlotte's hand, now angry at her ignorance.

I quickly let it go, watching as it falls to the side of the bed.

How cold it was.

I run to my room and grab my quilt.

Then I go back and place it over Charlotte.

What a good older sister she was.

Then I sit beside her bed, giving her apologies.

Why, I do not know.

I say sorry for taking her bread.

I say sorry for tugging at her hair.

I say sorry for wishing she'd stay sick forever.

Maybe if I keep saying sorry, she'll wake up and wipe the tears that suddenly appeared on my face.

Student Name: Alejandro Martello  
Grade: 8  
School: Creekside Park Jh School  
Title: The Best Game Of My Life  
Category: Personal Essay & Memoir  
Key: Silver Key  
Educator: Victoria Hagan

Have you ever been so tired that you could fall asleep that instant? That is how I feel right now. But I wasn't in bed. No. I was in the middle of a football field playing a game. It was the 4th quarter of the best homecoming game of my life. I could barely hear the crowd cheering over my heart beat. I had pains all over my body and yet, I kept going.

I was trudging as I came off the field after losing the ball. If they score, they win. I drank the entire bottle of water handed to me by my waterboy ready to get back on the field. I went back to defense the next play. It was hard to move with my pads weighing me down. They are on our 45 progressing to the end zone. They ran a run play. I charged the running back with all my might. When we collided, it felt like I was hit by a train. We went down hard. I got up and realized that he only got 5 yards. If I didn't make that tackle, He would have scored. I got up and could barely see with all the sweat in my eyes. Then they threw a pass that put them on the 10 yard line. With 5 seconds left in the game, they called a timeout. Our coach had an anxious look on his face. "Don't give up you guys." he said. "This is the final play so put in all your effort into it." As the coach finished up, the referee blew his whistle to get us back on the field. I was surprised that the ground didn't give out because of how hard my footsteps were hitting the ground. When we lined out for the play, I could see the running back. Knowing that he is going to get the ball. I was going to get him. There was a big puff of air that came out of my mouth. Then the play started. I eyed the QB handing off the ball to the running back. I started running at him. He ran to my left up the sideline. I hit him so hard that my teeth rattled. We hit the ground so violently it sounded like thunder. The buzzer rang loud. I stopped him an inch short of the endzone. We won the game! The crowd roared and the team ran on the field. I didn't get up from the ground, I was so tired.

The next practice was amazing. We were hitting hard and practicing our tackling. Our coach used me as an example for a lesson. Coach said "Anselmi was a great example of perseverance. He played the entire game and never gave up. You should push through the pain to keep going. Never give up." The rest of that practice was very hard. I made it

through the rest of practice only because of the amazing lesson I learned during the best game of my life.

Student Name: Kayla Thompson  
Grade: 8  
School: Creekside Park Jh School  
Title: The Divided Path  
Category: Personal Essay & Memoir  
Key: Silver Key  
Educator: Victoria Hagan

The moment slammed into me, like it was a wall of stone cold adamant and I sprinted into it head first. A blood curdling scream escaped from my lips as I collapsed. The burn of the carpet scraping against my knees. I could feel it. I knew that this was it. I could either let the darkness consume me or I consume the darkness. Heat waves washed over me like the ocean's endless dance with the land. It felt as though it would never end. And then it did. I lay trembling in the middle of my bedroom. The carpet had an imprint from which I dug so furiously with my palms. When I finally lifted them, I touched my face, reassuring myself that I was still there. Thoughts rushed at the speed of light but the most heavy, eerie thought lingered in the air- in the empty room. "It's over, I won."

I guess there always had been a beast- a darkness inside of me. The part of me that no one saw nor would I let them if they could. I mean who was I kidding? I barely let myself see. I rarely ever feel fear. Real fear that is. I mean, sure visions of terror that were made for the screen were one thing, but when the credits begin to roll, your vulnerability is gone, replaced by the loving touch of relief. The fear the darkness gives me is different. Worse. The darkness yearned for my fear. It drank it up. It was a beast. The skeleton in my closet. The demon under my bed. But I was always able to lock it up in an impenetrable cage. That was until I stepped foot in that wretched school. Then the cage rattled open.

My teachers called it anxiety. I hated it. How it always got the best of me. I hated it down to the marrow in my bones. It took everything from me. As I walked the halls my body didn't feel like it was my own. I was a shell of a person. I was wearing a mask of a happy, carefree kid. But in reality I was as brittle as graphite. Always on the brink of snapping. I mean what are you to do when the villain in your own narrative is you? Or some part of you, you don't know how to control.

I didn't tell anyone because I was and still am a stubborn fool. Stiff as a board. Unbudging and relentless. I didn't ask for help because that would mean confronting it. And at the time I thought it was best to leave it untouched. It was fine. That was until the end of a year dawned upon me. March through May is always the worst time of the year, because everyone has deadlines to meet. Teachers spend it hoping students are ready for standardized testing, and kids. Well kids spend these 3 months praying for the warm glow of the summer sun to shine upon their faces. Not that of the jarring fluorescent lights of

school. But the main reason this time period is the worst is all of the work. School becomes a leech, a blood sucking parasite towards the end of year. So it was only fitting that I snapped at this time.

It depends who you ask why it happened. My parents say it was the work, my teachers say it was my lack of sleep, my friends say it was the kids who flare their nostrils at the very mention of my name. I don't care what it was but I'm glad it happened. Though the reasoning behind the howling wind that knocked all of the dominos into place remains a compelling cold case, I remember every emotion I felt in my lowest moment. Agony, wrath, rage, pain, disdain of any form of love anyone has ever given me, but most of all I felt an overwhelming feeling of clarity. I saw ahead of me, in my mind. Past the salty taste of tears that gushed out of my burning, bloodshot eyes. Past the agonizing shrill that I wasn't sure was in my head or escaping in between my gut wrenching sobs. No, I tuned it all out. Everything I saw in my mind. Or at this moment a labyrinth of disturbed thoughts. I could feel my knees sink further into the plush carpet as I pondered upon the image that I conjured.

I saw my future. It was divided in two. It was up to me to choose which path I shall walk upon for the rest of my life. One path was that of hope and resolve. What would happen if I snapped out of the haze of sulking and brooding I placed myself in for what felt like a lifetime? But, the second one? The second path was the stuff of nightmares. My future if I let it consume me. It was up to me. To choose the path. Both of them end in death but it was the journey to the grave that was different. It was merely a matter of whether I wanted to glide down the path, or lug every self-given burden. Nothing but an aching, yearning persistence ran through me. Numbing the myriad of painful, drilling emotions. I forced myself off my knees. I wiped away my tears. It was at that moment that I felt whole again. I was myself again. My whole self. My stubborn pride, my forgiving heart. All of me finally returned. I won. And never, never again would I let something take these parts of me. These parts of me are precious, more valuable than any jewel. Simply in how they bring light and color back into the world.

Student Name: Laura Grassi  
Grade: 8  
School: Creekside Park Jh School  
Title: The Fight To Get Back  
Category: Personal Essay & Memoir  
Key: Silver Key  
Educator: Victoria Hagan

The cold court engulfed my hot and tired body as I flew through the air to save the ball. A jolt of pain stabbed through my knee and into the rest of my leg. I got up and fell straight back down. I heard the muffled screams of my teammates yelling at me to get up, but no matter how hard I tried my leg wouldn't allow me to. The next thing I heard was the whistle of the ref signaling us to stop. The silence in the gym was deafening as everyone's eyes turned to look down at me. My mom and coach ran over to me and tried to help me up. I attempted to explain to them what happened as I fought back my tears. The lump in my throat got bigger and I couldn't hold it in anymore. I could feel my leg getting more swollen and all I wanted was to go home. My coach picked me up and sat me on the bench next to my worried friends asking me if I was ok. The last thing I saw was the paramedics as they loaded me onto the stretcher and into the ambulance.

I woke up drowsy and looked around me to find a hospital room along with worried looks plastered onto my family's faces. My head pounded as I tried to remember what caused me to end up in this situation. I heard a gasp and jolted up to see where the sound was coming from. My mom got out of her chair and came over to me. "What happened?" I asked. My parents turned to face each other. "Let's call the doctor and he'll explain everything to you" said my dad. The doctor came in shortly after and explained to me that I had torn my acl. When I thought it couldn't get any worse, he told me I wouldn't be able to play for the rest of the season and possibly not for the rest of my life. My heart dropped to my stomach. We had won almost all of our games so far and we were so close to the final 2. I was stuck, it felt like the world had moved on without me. Volleyball had been my passion since I was 8 and this injury could stop me from playing to my fullest potential. The next morning, I thought to myself, if volleyball was everything to me I couldn't just stop playing because of a little injury. I knew I was strong and that if I fought hard enough I could recover. From that moment on, I knew that I would play again despite what the doctor had told me.

A few weeks later, I had been cleared from the hospital and even though my knee still hurt, as soon as I got home I hobbled over to the guest room where I would be staying until I felt better. I took out my computer and a piece of paper and wrote down what I would do to recover as fast as I could. I did stretches everyday to help prevent pain and went to physical therapy as much as I could. While I was healing I peppered to myself and

practiced my setting and passing against the wall until I was sure I wouldn't lose my skills. I had promised myself that I would be fully healed and able to play by next season. I worked as hard as I could for months until I was walking alone without crutches or a brace. After almost a year I started going on morning walks to train myself to walk normally again. At first I couldn't go farther than a mile but I continued to wake up at 8:00 am everyday to go on my walks. I started getting to the point where I could confidently walk 3 miles and even pepper back and forth with my friends. After multiple sessions of volleyball with my friends in my backyard, my mom asked me if I wanted to go to practices to try out for the next season. Hesitantly I said yes, I knew that there was a possibility that I could hurt myself again and never be able to walk like I used to but I persevered.

When my coach saw me at tryouts the next week she was shocked. She told me that if I could still play like I used to she would put me on the team with no questions asked. I knew that that was my chance and that I had to run with it, so I did. At first I was a little rusty but as soon as I was warmed up I was on fire. My digs were amazing and my backrow attacks were strong. After tryouts ended my coach came up to me and told me that she had never seen anyone as persistent as me. I went home proud of myself. Even if I didn't make the team I knew what I had been through and how much I had pushed myself so I was happy. 3 days later I took a deep breath and opened the email I had received that would tell me if I had made it or not. I slowly opened my eyes and... "we are excited to inform you that you have made the 2022 12s team!" I was ecstatic! I was so proud of myself and confident about this season. Even through all my hardships and all the pain, I had recovered in a little bit less than a year. To top off my success we had an amazing season. Most of my past teammates had made the same team as me and we had a blast. That season I learned that if I work hard for something I could get it as long as I persevere.

Student Name: Cade Hall

Grade: 8

School: Tomball Junior High School

Title: The Genetic Advantages of Transgender Athletes

Category: Critical Essay

Key: Silver Key

Educator:

Imagine this; You're competing in a girl's NCAA swim meet, and the race just started. Everyone looks pretty even for the first couple seconds, until one person pulls away. And away. And away. It's as if this person has some sort of... advantage against the other competitors. As if they're too good to compete at this level. Like they were just built differently than the rest. Spoiler alert: They are. Enter the world of transgender athletes, who have serious genetic advantages that will upset the balance in sports we have worked so hard to keep in check. Things like this keep being allowed in athletics, and we need to stop it.

To start off, what does it mean to be transgender? Well, if someone is transgender, they have undergone surgery to change their physical gender from the one they were assigned at birth. This means that a man, after undergoing surgery, can go from being an Assigned Male at Birth (AMAB) to a physical woman through many complicated procedures, and vice-versa. The only thing that changes about this person is their genitalia, which will either become female or male after surgery. None of the person's genetics will change, which means transgender men still possess all of the scientifically proven physical advantages of men. Someone like this could compete in a women's sporting event, and be physically dominant to all of their competitors. How about we look at an example of these genetic advantages in the field?

Enter Lia Thomas. She's a transgender athlete who competes for the women's swim team at the University of Pennsylvania. Thomas has broken multiple records, and all of this can be traced back to her genetic advantages of being a male pre-surgery. As Article 2 (See Link 2) states, some fellow swimmers of Thomas' have stated, "To ignore these (genetic advantages) was to undermine a half-century fight for female equality in sport." (Paragraph 3, Link 2) Even people who have swam with Thomas have called attention to her advantages, which just shows how unfair it is to let her compete in women's sports. Thomas has responded to these claims stating, "I'm not a man. I'm a woman, so I belong on the women's team." While this may be true, she is still a genetic male. Even if she's a physical woman, she is still built like a man, and possesses the physicality of one as well, which we have seen when she swims. I'm going to show you exactly what the genetic differences between men and women are, so that you can have a better understanding of just how unfair this is.

As the article “Genetic and epigenetic sex-specific adaptations to endurance exercise” by Shanie Landen, Sarah Voisin, Jeffrey M. Craig, Sean L. McGee, Séverine Lamon, and Nir Eynona states “Specifically, higher testosterone levels in males could contribute to performance improvements and reduce the relative influence of the ACTN3 on muscle power, but this hypothesis has not been verified experimentally.” (Paragraph 9, Link 3) ACTN3 encodes the alpha-actin-3 protein that is expressed in the sarcomere of fast glycolytic type II fibers and is important for the generation of explosive power contractions. Basically, it lets someone be more explosive, and ACTN3 is much more commonly found in men. Being able to be more explosive would help Thomas with her swimming skills, since you need to be explosive in order to swim harder and faster than the rest and win. This shows how Thomas has an advantage over her fellow swimmers, but this advantage stretches far beyond the reaches of competitive swimming alone.

I’m sure most of us are familiar with Venus and Serena Williams, a highly dynamic pair of sisters that may arguably be the best women’s tennis players ever. They, at an event called “The Battle of the Sexes,” set out to beat the World No. 203 Karsten Braasch. This started after the sisters had allegedly declared in the ATP office that they could win against any male player ranked outside of the top 200. Braasch overheard the conversation, and, after losing both his singles and doubles openers at a tournament that day already, volunteered to play. Braasch almost immediately took a 5-0 lead, and lost a set to go to 5-1, but the then 54-year-old Braasch closed it out without a hiccup to win the set 6-1. Afterwards, Serena, then 40, stated that she played just as well as she usually does. She said she was astounded at how easily Braasch could return balls that would have won on the WTA tour. After looking at this, we can now see how the world’s best women were easily beaten by a 203rd ranked male competitor, who, might I add, was 14 years older than Serena. There is no denying that men have serious genetic advantages that cannot be ignored in the world of sports, especially if we want to let transgender athletes compete in their new gender’s sports.

Sports officials and rulemakers need to realize just how unfair it is to let transgender athletes compete in their current gender’s sporting world. Men have serious genetic advantages over women, as we have seen with Thomas, Braasch, the Williams sisters, and pure, hard, science. In conclusion, we need to only allow transgender athletes to compete in their birth-assigned gender’s sports, so we can make sure that all sports competitions stay equal and fair for all competitors.

Student Name: Victoria Palma

Grade: 11

School: Tomball High School

Title: The New Girl

Category: Short Story

Key: Silver Key

Educator:

"Hey, is anyone sitting here?"

I look up to see a girl with long, flowy auburn hair. As she meets my gaze, I am drowned by the glistening ocean swirling in her eyes.

"Hello?" she asks with a hint of irritation.

"Sorry," I laugh nervously. I can't mess this up. I've never felt such a strong gravitational pull towards someone in my life. There's something about her, the way she managed to put me in a trance, but I can't tell exactly what. "Yes, yes you can." I tell her as I push my glasses up, hoping I didn't bore her with my delayed response.

"Took you long enough." she huffed in response, visibly annoyed.

Good job. You already ruined it, idiot. "How come I've never seen you around?" I ask, hoping to save any spark of conversation possible. She dives into details about why she's new, as her parents move frequently for work related reasons, but I've been struggling to listen. I'm too entranced by her.

"It's pretty hard having to readjust and learn the ropes of a new school every couple months," she says, "but I've gotten used to it. That's how I met my boyfriend anyways."

Of course she has a boyfriend, why wouldn't she? She's the typical girl next door.

"Moving schools constantly helped you meet your boyfriend?" I ask confused, but mostly envious. Who was I to think I even stood a chance with a girl like her, let alone assume she wasn't already taken.

She finally smiles, "Not quite. Our parents used to work together so we were kind of each other's lifeline at each new school. His parents and him finally settled down in the last town a few months ago, but my parents and I kept moving." Lightbulb moment. Boyfriend is not here.

"Sorry, that must suck. But hey, for what it's worth, I can be your lifeline for now," I smile probably the most heartfelt smile I've had in a while.

"I would love that," she beats me and smiles bigger.

I begin to remember my manners and attempt to ask for her name, but right before words can come out our teacher cues class to commence. Mid lesson, the girl begins to dig in her bookbag for what felt like an eternity. As she finally pulls something out, I'm blinded by the brightness of her notebook as the sunlight hits the pink shimmers on the front cover. On the front I read, "CASSIE MITCHELL" in large, iridescent, bubble-print, ironed on letters. I didn't picture her to be the artistic or crafty type, but once again she leaves me stunned. After attendance is called, I realize our teacher never called Cassie's name. Typical issue for new kids. This is my time for redemption. "Mrs. Ray, you forgot about Cassie. Today's her first day" I shout across the room; this is the only time I've spoken all year.

Mrs. Ray looks puzzled, I can't tell if it's because this is the first time she has heard my voice, or if she is looking for her name. "I don't see Cassie on my roster. How about you guys go down to the office after class and check her enrollment for me?"

Being the gentleman I am, or am trying to be, I agree and let Cassie know it's a common mistake.

"Thanks, Cody. You're the best." she replies with a smirk. I wonder if the whole class could hear my heart pounding at this moment.

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A couple weeks pass and surprisingly enough, I'm still her only friend, if we can even call each other that. There's not many students at Brentwood High, in other words, everybody knows everybody. So, you can imagine my confusion when she tells me she hasn't had much luck making friends. In a selfish way, this makes me feel good, knowing I'm the only one. Although we only have one class together, we've been lab partners for every assignment, we sit at lunch together, and on one rare occasion I was given the honor of taking her home afterschool. When I'm not with Cassie I typically spend my days thinking about her, more specifically I think about what to say the next time I see her. I can't afford to slip up with a girl like her.

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As another day of 4th period ends, Cassie and I are finally leaving the soul sucking, hell hole of AP Bio. We enter the hallway overwhelmed by the overlapping conversations. I've noticed that ever since I became friends with Cassie and spent more time with her, I receive a multitude of stares and whispers each passing day. Not that I would know, but this must be usual for her, especially when a borderline below average male is walking with the next supermodel. We part ways and I reach my next period. I find my seat in the back of the class and watch the fluorescent screen of my phone light up.

"Hi Cody. It's Cas, what are you doing Saturday?"

She has my number? Although it's been months since we met, I still haven't worked up the courage to ask her for any forms of contact outside of school. Guess she beat me to it. "Probably nothing. Why, what's up?" I respond, attempting to sound cool and collected. Nobody has ever asked me what I was up to on a weekend before.

Cassie replies, "My friend from my old school hosts this Halloween party every year. Since my boyfriend already has an invite, I can bring plus one. Down to come?"

I hope nobody saw my jaw drop to the ground as I read that text. This is probably- no, this is definitely- the most important question I have been asked in my entire life. "Sounds cool. I'm down" I reply, hoping she doesn't sense my extreme eagerness. Unlike Cassie, I don't make people stop and stare. I've been going to the Brentwood schools since I was 10 years old. However, if you were to ask anybody else, they would probably tell you I moved here last year. It's not that I don't like socializing, I've simply never gotten along with anyone in my town. This time is different. I, Cody Griffin, am going to a highschool party.

That day afterschool, I began prepping for this monumental day. I began making my afternoon snack in the kitchen, overhearing my mother in the next room watching another one of her daily crime shows. Today's episode was about a family tragedy. She invites me to watch it with her, but I have more important priorities. Some might say I'm over excited, but I would argue that I am just over prepared.

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Today will go down in history as my social emergence.

"Cody! Over here!," Cassie yells.

My whole body is overtaken by chills, she looks like an angel. Literally- she is dressed as an angel. Throughout the front lawn, people are crowding around, running to get inside the house, but my focus is narrowed in on Cassie. The sun hits her sparkly wings and halo perfectly, making her look ten times as beautiful than she already is.

"So are you going to come in or what?"

She brings me back to reality and I follow her inside. Greeting all of her old friends and acquaintances, I am stuck behind her like a puppy dog on a leash. While I want to branch out and socialize, maybe even make a friend, I still feel like I can't let her out of my sight.

"I'm going to get us some drinks, I'll be back"

So much for sticking together. If it were my choice, Cassie and I would have been clung to each other's hips the entire night, but Cassie is Cassie, so she has other, probably cooler, friends; plus, her boyfriend. I wait patiently on the only empty couch in sight. 10 minutes pass. I crack my knuckles anxiously. Then 35 minutes have passed. Did she forget about me? After an hour passes, I finally stand up. I don't even know where to begin looking for

her. She was getting drinks, so I'll check the kitchen first. As I make the trek, I am surrounded by a crowd swallowing me whole, drinks spilt everywhere, music blaring so loud I can't distinguish what the person next to me is saying.

She's not here. Strange. I begin to consider the possibility that she may have forgotten about me, it wouldn't be the first time someone has. So, I do what I should have done in the first place: pick up my phone and dial her number. The phone rings six times, no answer. I'll try again. Six more rings, still no answer. Maybe her phone is dead? I decide to wait in my car for the rest of night, or at least until she appears again. Whatever was left of my social battery is drained and I no longer see a point in staying inside if Cassie is not there to accompany me. However, I refuse to leave without a drink. I walk back into the kitchen, climbing on top of stacks of trash and boxes, grab a seltzer and take a couple sips. How do people drink this? "Yuck." I throw the drink away on my way out. As I walk out to my car, I notice it has been completely blocked in by tens of cars stacked behind mine. Yeah, there is no way I'm getting out of here.

Lucky enough, like the guardian angel she is, I hear Cassie's warm voice yell from across the street. "Leaving already?"

A sigh of relief and a sense of peace flows throughout my body. "I was waiting for you! I thought you had forgotten about me." I shout back, in hopes that she assures me I was still in the back of her mind.

"Forget about you? Never! Sorry, I just got busy talking."

I chuckle, "Just making sure." I want to ask her if we can stay outside for the rest of the night, watch the stars, maybe even go for a drive when my car is freed. Except, I remember a minor detail. "Hey Cas, didn't you say your boyfriend was here? Can I meet him?" She looks at me as if I had grown a third arm.

"B-boyfriend? How did you know I had a boyfriend?" she replies confused.

"Are you serious? The first conversation we ever had you told me you had a boyfriend. The only reason I'm here is because he already had an invite." Am I going crazy? Did I imagine that?

Cassie chuckles. "Cody, I think you've had too much to drink. How about we call an Uber home? There's no way your car is getting out of that mess tonight"

Her voice fades as I try to recall our first conversation once again.

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"It's pretty hard having to readjust and learn the ropes of a new school every couple months," she says, "but I've gotten used to it. My parents are waiting to get promoted to this HR position, so we haven't settled down yet. It's really hard not having a designated group of friends, or even just having one lifeline."

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Is my mind playing tricks on me? That's not how I remembered it. Maybe I have had too much to drink. I brush my thoughts away. "No problem, Cassie. I'll get one now." Scrolling through the options on the mobile app, in search of a ride, one option sticks out. "GILLY, 100ft AWAY" Woah, perfect. "Cas! There is one that's less than a minute away, should we take that one?"

"Yes! The sooner the better!"

The sooner the better? I thought she was having fun. It looked like it anyways. Girls are weird. This is weird.

Just like the app had said, our uber driver, Gilly, pulled up to the front of the house in a matter of seconds. "Hello, young folks!", he says shakily. We sit in the back and all I can see is his gray hair sticking up, almost blocking the rearview mirror. He begins to drive, almost ten miles under the speed limit. This is gonna take forever. I look over at Cassie and she is knocked out. I close my eyes and try to get some rest, too.

I wake up from what felt like the longest nap of my life. "Are we there yet?" No one responds. As my eyes slowly open, I look at my surroundings and realize everyone is gone. I fix my posture and realize I'm no longer in the backseat with Cassie, but instead in the front where our driver should be sitting. I try to get out, but I can't. I pull at the handles, with each pull getting more intense. I scream for Cassie. I scream for Gilly. I scream for help. I realize this is not my biggest issue. Where am I? As I look around, still captive in the car, my surroundings are an unfamiliar abyss. All I see are trees for miles on end. While thoroughly inspecting the forest, I see a figure in the distance. Is that... Cassie? I scream her name even louder. My throat and vocal cords ripping in agony as I beg for her, someone, or something to come and save me. Right when I felt I couldn't yell any longer, I begin to think of possible ways to get out of the car. All I can think of is to use the metal part on my seat belt to break the car glass. I bang on the window with all my might, my hands bruised and bleeding from the seatbelt being jabbed into my hand over and over again. After twenty-seven agonizing hits to the glass, it finally shatters, sending a wave of sound into the surrounding forest, scaring any birds and animals away. I run as fast as my slender legs can take me towards the figure I believe to be Cassie. Using whatever is left of my now hoarse voice, I keep calling her name, but she doesn't look back. Her vision is fixated on the ground beneath her. As I walk closer, time stops. My body becomes frozen and I am suddenly unable to take a full breath. "C-Cassie, w-what is this?" my voice trembles as I look up, except she's not there. I look down again, and fully comprehend what I am seeing. There is a small silver plaque on the ground which reads, "HERE LIES CASSIE MITCHELL." There are no flowers, notes, or any form of physical love surrounding this grave but instead an old broken bottle of whiskey and a shattered picture frame of a family. Upon closer inspection I see Cassie in this image, eyes crossed out and a needle in her head. Oh my god. She is accompanied by a large family with a

mom, a dad, 2 brothers, and a sister. But this isn't Cassie's family, I know it isn't. Cassie was an only child and I've seen pictures of her mom. I look even closer, and my eyes fixate on one of the brothers. I've seen him before. But there's no way. It can't be. Before I let my mind take over once again I pull out my phone and search up Brandon Newey, the name of Cassie's so-called boyfriend, and there he is. As clear as day, the boy in the image is Brandon, and this must be his family. I am still lost, hoping this is all a bad nightmare I will wake up from soon. I pray I will wake up and Cassie will be there. Alongside our driver, and everyone at the party.

But this never happens, because Cassie was never real. My mind races through our memories and I realize that everything is now different. Cassie never met me. I never met her. We were never lab partners. We never sat at lunch together. The stares in the hallway from my peers weren't because of Cassie's extraordinary beauty, but because instead I was visibly going insane, constantly speaking to someone who wasn't there. Someone who was never there, and will never be there. Cassie did have a boyfriend though, and he was the boy pictured in this image. She must have feared I had found out the truth when I had asked to meet him and lied about him, in a sense of panic. Upon further research, I found an article titled "Brandon Newey Obituary". As I read, tears started to swell in my eyes and stream down my cheeks. "Today we mourn Brandon, alongside with his siblings and parents as they were killed in a tragic mass homicide," I scroll more and cry even harder. "Killer Cassie Mitchell was not, and will never be put to justice as she was found hanged in the same home hours after the unsuspecting family had been brutally murdered. After further examination, this case has been deemed to be a murder-suicide and will not be reopened in the near future." At this very moment, the never ending forest around me makes me feel even smaller. It was all too good to be true. Everything we, well I, experienced was a lie. My own mind is fooling me. But why me? Then, I remember that day in the kitchen. My mother was not watching some ordinary episode, but the story of Cassie. Maybe I knew Cassie in a past life, or maybe I didn't. I most likely will never know.

Right when I think things couldn't get worse, the fluorescent screen of my phone that used to hold Cassie's texts lights up. In two sentences, my fears were proven to be true as I realized everything from the beginning to the car ride here was all part of a facade. I click the message and it reads,

"Hey, it's your uber. I just got to the house."

Student Name: George Watrous  
Grade: 9  
School: Tomball Memorial High School  
Title: The Rain  
Category: Flash Fiction  
Key: Silver Key  
Educator: Takeisha Woods

Thomas sits and watches the rain fall down. He can't quite touch it, although it seems he can. The barrier is near invisible, a thin pane of glass 'protecting' him from the elements. He is rarely outside this room, never has he felt a rain-drop, but he knows what it would feel like. He loves the rain because it doesn't deny or ignore him, it tries to reach him, the rain permeates everywhere eventually. They won't let him outside, and he knows he couldn't make it on his own, but he is more than they think. To them he is barely human, clinging to life rather than living. He can't show them that he has thoughts, and more than most. He wishes he could tell them, but his mouth could never form the words. Instead he waits and watches the rain. She walks in, she does this every day, comes and feeds him dinner. He loves his mom, and loves to see her, but at the same he dreads this moment. It is a testament to those who love him, who just might see past the surface, but a testament all the same to his disabled, distorted body.

Emily walks home from school, and it starts raining again. This happens almost every week, but it still surprises her. She just doesn't quite realize the implications of the thunderhead gathering above her. It's been almost two weeks since it happened, and she has neither recovered or come to understand it. One day she went to school, and it seemed as if everyone she knew had found one reason or another to hate her. She sat alone at lunch, talked to no one, and distanced herself from even her parents. Some people began to talk to her again, but she didn't want to risk what happened before. She began wearing headphones everywhere she went because then people kept their distance. As the rain pours down she tries to cover her head with her backpack, but she can't keep it out. The rain permeates everything eventually.

Thomas rolls to his computer. To him it is a magical thing, a portal almost, that allows him to break free from his disabilities. His parents don't know he can type, they think he just plays video games. He thinks it would scare them if they knew who he really was, even stranger than he appeared. This is about the time she normally gets home from school, and he asks how her day was. She still doesn't know his condition, that he can't talk or move on his own, and he doesn't want to tell her. If he did, he risked closing that barrier forever. She responds a few minutes later, and they talk like they always do. They think he can't understand what they say, but he does, and sometimes it hurts. He can only type, so Emily knows his thoughts better than anyone else.

Emily grabs her computer as soon as she gets home, ignoring the sound of her parents half-hidden worry. She needs an escape, and the computer provides a thin, pixelated barrier, protecting her from danger. She talks to Thomas, but this isn't like school, he can't do any real damage. She doesn't talk about her friends who ditched her, or most aspects of her real, sobering life. She just talks of her happiest moments. She can be anyone she wants here, where she is safe.

A raindrop falls next to a thousand others just like it. It descends from the thunderhead gaining speed, then floating on a cloud of air as it reaches terminal velocity at 150 m/s. Its descent is about 2000 meters, ending as it lands on a small crack between shingle tiles and boards. While its thousand or more neighbors bounce off the roof, this one drips through the roof, and seeps through the boards and texturing to land on Thomas's head, his first raindrop. Miles away, Emily snuggles into her bed, the only dry place she knows. The rain permeates everywhere eventually, but it can't last forever. The two smile as they type back and forth, knowing that this is where they truly count.

Student Name: Mateo Herrera Franco  
Grade: 9  
School: Tomball Memorial High School  
Title: to fly again  
Category: Poetry  
Key: Silver Key  
Educator:

In love's soft nest, hearts entwine,  
A bird of acceptance, a dance divine.  
Wings unfurl, a flight unknown,  
Happiness whispers, a melody sown.

Feathers of trust, tender and bright,  
In the open sky, love takes its flight.  
No fear binds these wings so free,  
Only the winds of serenity.

With gentle hands, a loving guide,  
Lift the bird, let love abide.  
Nurtured in warmth, a caring embrace,  
Empowered to soar, find its own pace.

Through clouds of doubt, love soars high,  
Acceptance, a breeze beneath the sky.  
In the vast expanse, dreams take flight,  
Guided by the stars of pure delight.

Together they glide, a harmonious pair,

Love's symphony filling the air.  
Yet still below a bird of fate  
Lay Fay far below its flight come late

Beneath a shadow, where darkness lay,  
A bird lies trapped in dusk's dismay.  
But love arrives with gentle grace,  
A healing touch, a warm embrace.

As the bird of hope begins to sing,  
Lifting the soul on newfound wing.  
Through the storms, it learns to rise,  
Breaking free from its own demise.

Feathers now colored with hues so bright,  
Shattering the chains of endless night.  
In the open sky, a rebirth's begun,  
Depression's grip finally undone.

With each wingbeat, a heartbeat anew,  
Love's flight, a sky painted in rainbow hue.  
Soaring high, on loves new wings,  
Duality in all life's things

Student Name: Valentina Monroy

Grade: 12

School: Tomball High School

Title: We Were Girls

Category: Poetry

Key: Silver Key

Educator:

Friday night dinners with your family to escape mine

Sleepovers staying up all night

Summers filled with late movie nights

Comparing the sun lightened tips of our hair

Planning our outfits for school together

Laughing when it's silent in class

Being mistaken for sisters or twins

Singing "Blank Space" on the bus ride home

Bike rides after school around the neighborhood

Eating our snack in your wooden playground

Oreos (for you) and Chips Ahoy (for me)

Drinking a jar of iced tea and burping

Jumping on the trampoline til sunset

Running to each other every day at recess

Filming hair tutorials on your iPod Touch

Baking double batches of chocolate chip cookies

Just Dance competitions in your pitch black media room

Accidentally matching on picture day

Fran y Nina, Nina y Fran

Student Name: Kristopher Perez  
Grade: 10  
School: Tomball Memorial High School  
Title: Where The Sun Walks  
Category: Poetry  
Key: Silver Key  
Educator: Mariana Hill

I go now to a place I know not  
a home of sorts I presume  
I go now to see the moon.  
There where she sails amongst the stars  
and all the while the brightest slumbers,  
out of sight.

But he will return of this I am sure  
for I have seen it.  
I have watched him dance across the skies,  
and for a brief moment he pries into her night.  
If only for a second just to see her.  
To share in the heavens with her.  
Close enough to touch and yet they could never be further.

And it is here I go.  
To be one of their billion billion spectators as they sway over the earth.  
Bathed in stalks  
of purifying light.  
Would you like to come with me?  
Would you like to see where the sun walks?

Student Name: Olivia Anaipakos  
Grade: 8  
School: Annunciation Orthodox School  
Title: Childhood Remembrances  
Category: Poetry  
Key: Silver Key  
Educator: Marian Rosse

### Childhood Remembrances

Sticky popsicle hands  
Stained a startling blue.  
Bored out of my mind  
Blasting One Direction in my bedroom.

Gaping smiles,  
And tooth fairy-filled dreams,  
I never quite realized  
How much those memories would mean to me.

I wish I could go back  
To that little girl I was before.

Who knew nothing of insecurities,  
Plastic surgeries,  
Death  
Or war.

The seven-year-old girl  
Who wanted so badly to be grown.  
Had no idea about the world  
She was going to be shown.

Suddenly there are "creeps" to look out for.  
And we have to triple-check  
To make sure we locked the front door.

At fourteen I still have not seen it all  
But oh,  
What I would give,  
To still be small.

To get tucked into those blush-pink covers.  
And to read cheesy books  
About forbidden lovers.

My pillows piled high,  
A princess's fortress.  
Purple marker-stained walls,  
A self-portrait.

I would give anything,  
Anything.  
To travel back a few years.

Before all the lies,

Before all the tears.

Before we ever cared about what we wore,

And the guys

That were definitely

Not worth fighting each other for.

So, I wrote this poem

For the little girl

Who wants so badly to be grown.

Please,

Just wait

For the things

You are going to be shown.

Student Name: Citlalli Cruz  
Grade: 9  
School: Awty International School  
Title: A Mother and her Child  
Category: Poetry  
Key: Silver Key  
Educator: Ana Ebie-Mouton

Young lone tree  
Plucked from her roots to a foreign new land  
Small bud growing  
New life for her to care for  
Staying strong for them both  
Small leaf unfurls to show its glory  
Its life felt deep within her

Together they face  
All obstacles in their way  
From aggressive thunderstorms  
To burning frost  
Finding warmth and comfort  
In each other's  
Existence

Leaf falling from the tree  
Just like when a child leaves  
The wind swaying it in its breeze  
Just like how a mother cradles her child  
Loving it until letting it fly

Watching it until it

Reaches the Sky

Student Name: Alison Barrera  
Grade: 11  
School: Awty International School  
Title: Abortion is a Human Right  
Category: Critical Essay  
Key: Silver Key  
Educator:

“Though they faced the risk of hemorrhage or life-threatening infection from carrying those fetuses, the women were told they could not have abortions, the suit says” (“Five Women Sue Texas Over the State’s Abortion Ban”). Texas has stripped bodily autonomy from Ms. Zurawski and the other women who face life-threatening conditions without an abortion. Texas lawmakers such as General Ken Paxton take away bodily autonomy, which is defined as the self-determination of one's own body. Similarly in the novel, *The Handmaid's Tale*, Atwood describes how Gilead takes away bodily autonomy from women. In this dystopian society, the ability to create children has drastically decreased because of pollution, sexually transmitted diseases, and birth control before the regime. The decrease in children creates a society that highly values the ability to procreate. Gilead uses the fact that fertility rates have decreased to justify a system in which abortion is outlawed. Atwood criticizes that patriarchal institutions take away a woman's bodily autonomy to control them. Atwood's critique is still valid in 2023 Texas because Texas lawmakers restrict or deny access to abortion from women. I will talk about how Atwood's critique that Gilead uses fear to prevent doctors from performing abortions, creates an atmosphere in which healthcare workers fear involvement with abortion, and the claim that it outlaws abortion for the safety of children is false still applies to 2023 Texas because Texas policies punish healthcare workers that perform abortions and Texas lawmakers such as Texas Governor Greg Abbott's claim that he outlaws abortion because it protects children, yet places policies and laws that harm children.

Atwood's critique that Gilead hangs doctors to instill fear about the procedure of abortion is valid in 2023 Texas because lawmakers punish doctors that aid in abortion. At the beginning of the novel, Offred is on a walk and witnesses that Gilead hangs doctors and places a “placard hung around his neck to show why he has been executed: a drawing of a human fetus.” (Atwood 32). Atwood describes how Gilead's violence toward healthcare providers instills fear in citizens of Gilead around abortion. She describes this through a doctor being hung for the public to view and understand that his crime, which the “placard” is an identifier for, is that he was involved in the criminal action of abortion. Gilead does not see the “drawing of a fetus” as simply a fetus, but as a baby who is alive in the womb. The “drawing of a fetus” instills the idea in society that abortion is immoral because of the life that the healthcare provider takes. The idea of abortion as immoral is

prevalent in several sections of Texas law, which allow abortion providers and assistants to an abortion to be sued or fired. In section 171.208 of the Texas Health and Safety Code, any person tried by another in the case of involvement with an abortion may be fined up to no amount less than \$10,000 for each abortion that the defendant performed (“Abortion Laws”). Gilead’s use of fear is parallel to how Texas lawmakers punish doctors for providing abortions. Texas uses punishment through policies to instill fear and prevent abortion. While the punishment in Texas of being fined \$10,000 is not as extreme as Gilead hanging doctors, it does correlate abortion with criminality and further, it associates punishment with abortion. Society should not correlate criminal actions with abortion because it is healthcare which is medical care provided by healthcare workers. It is healthcare because it prevents pregnancy, which is the medical condition where a fertilized egg develops in the uterus and lasts about nine months. The association of punishment with abortion will ultimately disallow doctors to provide abortions and deny the important healthcare that many women and transgender people need. Not only does Gilead and Texas focus on the punishment of doctors, but they focus on the punishment of other healthcare workers such as nurses and others involved in the procedure of abortion.

Atwood’s critique that Gilead creates an atmosphere of fear among healthcare workers involved with the procedure of abortion is still valid in 2023 Texas because lawmakers punish nurses who aid in abortion. When Offred identified the doctors that were hanged, she describes that they were typically reported by “informants: ex-nurses perhaps” or “another doctor, hoping to save his own skin” and states that “informants are not always pardoned” (Atwood 33). Healthcare workers reporting each other illustrates how Gilead uses fear to instill fear in citizens in order for them to police each other. The fact that nurses have learned to report their fellow coworkers to the regime portrays how much fear has taken hold of people under the regime. Furthermore, the concept of “hoping to save his own skin” depicts how healthcare workers report each other in fear because they hope they can survive under the regime if they comply with Gilead’s demands. The fear under the regime is apparent in Texas because Jenny, a nurse who only wants to be identified by her first name because she fears being targeted by anti-abortion protestors, states how she denied a consultation to a patient because the clinic stopped providing abortions (“Pandemonium, then silence: Inside a Texas abortion clinic after the fall of Roe”). The denial of abortions takes away the decision to have a child from (mostly) women that will affect their life greatly not only because of the medical condition of pregnancy that will affect them for nine months, but the child that will affect them for the rest of their lives. A nurse who cannot provide a consultation to a patient because Texas outlaws it tells the patient that they have no choice in what happens to their body. This disallows people to make a decision about pregnancy, which would affect them for the rest of their lives. Since the overturning of *Roe V. Wade*, clinics have had to deny abortions to people who are simply asking for healthcare treatment. Clinics in Texas stopped providing abortions in contrast to the option of risking criminal charges because the

overturning of *Roe v. Wade* took away the constitutional right to abortion. Furthermore, healthcare workers such as Jenny fear violence from anti-abortion protestors who believe that people who provide abortions deserve punishment to prevent nurses and doctors from carrying out abortions. Anti-abortion protestors believe in punishment toward healthcare workers who provide abortions because they believe that abortion kills a baby, but in reality, it is a fetus. This relates to Gilead, where abortion is punishable because the regime highly values children due to the lack of fertility. The issue is that Gilead and Texas focus on the punishment of healthcare workers as well as the punishment of women.

Atwood's critique of the claim that abortion is outlawed for the sake of the children is still valid in 2023 Texas because lawmakers focus on punishing women rather than helping systems that serve children. During the ceremony referred to as "Birth Day" where handmaids give birth, Offred hopes that the child is not an "unbaby" (Atwood 112), which is a child with deformities or disabilities. Atwood uses irony to critique the claim that abortion must be outlawed for the sake of the children. She describes Gilead, a society in which children are highly valued, and then describes how terms such as "unbaby" are of common use. The irony is that Gilead claims to highly value children, but as soon as a fetus or a baby differs from the norm they choose to disregard it as human and refer to it as "unbaby." This proves that Gilead does not truly value children, it just values the idea of a perfect society according to patriarchal and ableist norms. Ultimately, Atwood portrays that Gilead prevents abortion to control women when it takes away bodily autonomy, not because they care about children. The theme in Gilead of patriarchal institutions that take bodily autonomy from women is obvious in section 171.104 under Civil Penalties, which states "this section allows the father of the fetus or the parents of an underage mother of the fetus who was aborted using a partial-birth abortion to sue" ("Abortion Laws"). Atwood's critique that institutions prevent abortion to control women and not because they care about the child in the novel applies to the reality in Texas which is portrayed through Texas lawmaker's emphasis on the punishment of women. Texas governor Greg Abbott claims he looks out for the safety of children when he bans abortions because he "promised we would protect the life of every child with a heartbeat" and uses this as justification to enforce policies that strip women of their bodily autonomy ("Governor Abbott Champions Protecting Unborn At Texas Rally For Life"). The critique applies and this claim is falsified because Texas lawmakers focus on punishment rather than focusing on supporting systems that serve children such as foster care. Furthermore, Atwood's critique applies which the hypocrisy makes evident because lawmakers such as Greg Abbott advocate for the punishment of women for abortion to protect children, yet will advocate for policies that endanger the lives of children. According to *The Texas Tribune*, "foster children spent the night (at offices and hotels) and in which many were given the wrong or improper doses of medication, exposed to sexual abuse or engaged in self harm"; but Governor Greg Abbott, in regards to children, has focused on "requiring transgender student-athletes to play only on teams aligned with their gender assigned at birth" ("Analysis: Texas' foster care problems are clear. The response from state leaders

isn't."). Greg Abbott is the current 2023 Governor who is known as an advocate for anti-abortion, yet disregards the reality of the foster care system in Texas. The fact that children in the Texas Foster Care system are not treated properly by the system, for example receiving improper medication, experiencing abuse, and suffering mentally, is a horrible reality. The issue arises with the fact that the governor chooses to ignore this reality, yet his focus regarding children is taking away the right for transgender children to partake in high school sports. Governor Abbott advocates against transgender youth rights with the knowledge that it endangers children because transgender children are more likely to commit suicide because of the isolation they experience in society. Gilead and Texas use the safety of children as justification for denying women rights lacks legitimacy.

In conclusion, Atwood's critique of patriarchal institutions through the example of Gilead is still valid in 2023 Texas because lawmakers, who are typically white males, restrict or deny access to abortion from women. Texas lawmakers restrict bodily autonomy to control women. Patriarchal institutions such as Gilead and the Texas government continue to instill fear in people who want their bodily autonomy through punishment in the law. Governor Greg Abbott and other Texas lawmakers take away power from women and some transgender people through the justification of protecting children and through the use of fear to prevent healthcare workers from providing abortions. In actuality, abortion is an essential medical care that physicians should be able to provide without interference from lawmakers or any other institutions with power. The overturning of *Roe v. Wade* in 2022 when the United States, which took away the constitutional right to abortion, disproportionately affects people of color because they are more likely to obtain abortions and have more limited access to healthcare ("What are the Implications of the Overturning of *Roe v. Wade* for Racial Disparities?"). It is important that in the coming years, people in Texas and across the United States continue to advocate for women's rights so women can retain abortion and overall their bodily autonomy.

Student Name: Olivia Mayne  
Grade: 7  
School: Awty International School  
Title: Children's Innocence  
Category: Poetry  
Key: Silver Key  
Educator: Josefina Cullinane-Jose

Childhood

Innocent,  
Until exposed.  
Kind,  
Until harmed.  
Honest,  
Until lied to.

Sweet sounds,  
Innocence.  
"What's that?"  
"Tell you later."

Patience, child-  
You've a long way  
To go,  
Learn,  
Live,  
Love.

Ignore the news,  
They're told.

Ignore  
Suffering?  
Pain?  
Injustice?  
Racism?  
Homophobia?

A child  
Might not  
Know,  
Recognize,  
Feel.  
The power,  
Of words.

Yet,  
Children,  
Subject to  
All evils.

Student Name: Sophia Gurevich  
Grade: 10  
School: Awty International School  
Title: country; country; country  
Category: Poetry  
Key: Silver Key  
Educator:

country, country, county  
this country is your home  
your place to be  
to hike up Masada  
and float on the sea  
this country is your home  
your place to be  
to chant our prayers  
look at the stars with glee  
this country is your home  
though not to all  
so you want it to crumble?  
you want it to fall?  
this country is your home  
filled with your own  
just thousands and thousands  
We shall continue to grow.  
From the break and bend  
and shoes then hollowed  
i clench my eyes  
“just forget what followed.”

yet I refuse to forget,  
We can't accept defeat  
WE DO NOT STAND TO IMPOSE A THREAT  
this country is my home  
Built for us abused.  
Yet have been plenty  
Why do you insist this is excuse.  
Though must I support  
every decision they make ?  
every person they hurt,  
And yet they started with take.  
Comes justification with all  
that goes without a doubt  
There is no righteous death,  
undoubtedly there is no righteous drought.  
But why squeeze their screeches out  
Just to hear is echo  
I see what is denied, laying out on their streets.  
Leaving their families hopeless,  
And struck with defeat.  
If we could separate the people from the government, what would be left?  
Millions of people  
Resided with rest.  
Yet one can only dream,  
What has already been done,  
Both lands are stricken,  
So harsh and firm,  
By those who still love but then had to lose

One may say,  
"Leaving no other option is left than to watch them abuse"  
I personally don't know when its right to agree  
I know there is suffering,  
Trust me;  
I CAN SEE.  
To fracture and bend,  
What is to be my home.  
They always fight back,  
But that's not all that they know.  
We are no powerhouse.  
We struggle to strengthen.  
This is a system  
Built up from 18  
Off of the pure hatred  
Those around continue to bear  
To hold too closely to themselves,  
Causing to shred us apart with your bare hands.  
So i sit every week, crowded by those who grief  
As I woman I cannot  
Bear to know  
How you defaced our bodies  
That our mothers helped us grow.  
How you dragged us down,  
As we are one,  
Down the streets of our town.  
Do not shudder to think why we are done.  
For the miniscule percentage,

That we all seem to be  
In the larger scale  
Of the world we reside on  
Your suffers are to all,  
You are not alone  
I just can't understand why u kill what is home  
This country i my own  
understandably not to all.  
Though very controversial;  
I refuse to let it crumble,  
And I refuse to let it fall.

Student Name: Leila Sholokhova  
Grade: 9  
School: Awty International School  
Title: Focus  
Category: Poetry  
Key: Silver Key  
Educator: Ana Ebie-Mouton

Focus

The test is easy

You studied for hours

Now you just have to

Focus

Can you do that

Focus

Focus

It's all anyone asks you to do

Focus on the x and y coordinates

Focus on the crooked lines of the graph

Focus on the erasers having on the paper

Focus on the time

The time the time the time

No more time

They snatch the paper

Holy shit

Why couldn't you remember

Why couldn't you remember the formulas

Why can't you be normal

Why can't you sit through a thirty minute lecture

God why

What is even wrong with you

Why can't you focus

Everyone else can

Just focus

Itseasy

Just

Focus

Student Name: Dariia Chugueva

Grade: 10

School: Awty International School

Title: From here you can see your absolution---if you squint; you can see your absolution

Category: Short Story

Key: Silver Key

Educator:

Tuck the devastation under your tongue! Look between your wife and child—flushed, full-breasted sauna pigeons. Spring isn't the only season to begin with baptism.

The child doesn't understand baptism, but neither is she sad. Snot congeals above her lip. Wind lopsides the fire and the snowfall. The naked skeleton of your house peers between the tongues of flame, and the girl watches, pressing her fingers to the edges of her mouth. Everything's so wet, and still, your house burns! The girl rubs her jawbone, as if discovering it, then her earlobe. You wipe the snot from her nose and mud clings to your shoes as you raise them. All around the house is mud. Behind the house there are hills lined with mud. And even in the dream, you know you're a stranger here because you are not so crass and elemental, you can't ignore the beauty. The sky is frighteningly near. The sun awakes and coats your necks. The day has begun. The calendars will say a month and a season have begun. The birds will say A MONTH AND A SEASON HAVE BEGUN.

You collect the firewood at your feet and approach the ruins of your house, wife and child in tow. All that will follow is mimicry and pantomime. You will learn to live on the strength and precision of pantomime, closing invisible doors over fingers, lodging your heads in invisible ovens, praying to approximate, proximate gods. Your wife beats your child with an invisible rod, until the shock and the sting snaps the girl's concentration and the stick stops existing. You shut your eyes.

...

The sun bares its white, consumptive little body as they count you. Thirty girls, and you are the sixth in line. This is important in the way all numbers are important, in the way all order is important. Everyone is laughing. It's easier to laugh when you're in line.

The girl in front of you has long and snaking braids that make you remember your daughter. You're thinking of her when the march to the nurse's office begins. Her plain and agreeable face, her own fascination with it, like she, too, was dreaming. Maybe the wife as well. Everyone had one foot in the door, eh? The door burned down with the rest of the house. Your sneakers make no sound as you march.

The checkups are individual this year. Under a strict one-by-one, shut door policy that has everyone giggling and sighing, crossing themselves with relief. But who will be there to see you? Who will be there to share in your humiliation? You look around. Who will be there? Who will come in? Who will save me? Show thy face.

And all at once Judit is behind you, her chin tucked over your shoulder. "I have a secret," she whispers fiercely.

"What's your secret?"

"Please help me!"

"That's not a secret. Everyone knows that."

"I'm not wearing any underwear!" She laughs, and you smell shame, but you can't be sure. You can never be sure if other people are ashamed of themselves. "I need yours."

"I need mine!"

"I'll give it back."

Judit has asked for your jacket, your homework, your lunch. Bites and moments and never enough to deprive you, never anything outrageous. She likes the sick look on your face when you're inconvenienced. You had a science project together last fall, and each time you met to work, she came late. You never gave her anything.

But you wiped the snot from your daughter's face. You wanted to feed her her own name, whisper sweetly over her head, but she had none. There was no need. She was always there.

As the line shuffles forward, Judit drums her fingers against your shoulder, and you know her well enough to see that this is not impatience. Judit is eternally patient. Judit is sick, sick, sickening.

Are you there with me, Judit?

"Alright."

Something comes over her, a calm years in the making. An incorruptible, anesthetized sanguinity. Her whole face goes slack and her hand halts its dances. When you leave the bathroom, girl in tow, holding your skirt down with happy, hail mary fingers, the checkups are almost through.

"I'll cut in somewhere. You get in line at the very end, and after I'm done, I'll slip them to you."

"Don't worry, I'm eternally patient too."

She smiles without understanding and runs off.

When it is your turn, look around for her. You go still, even as the feet behind you hold the line, tapping. She isn't in the crowd.

"Judit?"

You're too scared to shout, so you pass over each face—once, twice, thrice, first taking it in its entirety, then prying nose from mouth to ensure you haven't somehow missed her.

Disembodied tongues float through your periphery, reconciling with disembodied eyes and noses, all savoring the easy, womb temperature plunge. "Judit?"

The nurse wraps her hand around your wrist and you are done for. And it is somehow easier than you thought. In the little yellow office, she weighs you, measures you, and when the time comes to strip and stretch out your arms, you obey without prelude. You forget how to explain yourself, and this resignation, which is not a resignation, is also not the brief respite of eternal recurrence. This hasn't happened before. This will not happen again. You know this when you drop the skirt and she gasps and covers her eyes. You know this when you say to yourself 'Judit. Judit Judit Judit you make me sick. But in the dream I was kind. I was so kind I loved the earth and inherited the weak. I'll never forgive you.'

The nurse has seen enough of your humiliation. She ushers you out, muttering about appropriate behavior. You don't hold your skirt. Have you seen enough of your humiliation? Have you seen enough of your daughter?

Judit finds you on the asphalt after school, and for once, she needs nothing.

"Not even my lunch?" You tease, but you never tease.

"You have everything I want."

"I hate you."

"I want that too."

Forgiveness is the animal that sits on the dock and swings its feet across the water. And you're cheap. You'll forgive anything. You aren't waiting for people to wrong you. You aren't crazy. But what difference would it make if you were? You are just as eager lucid. All is well from the first sign of snot.

Children foursquare in the shade, unafraid of the fires of your periphery. The sun is windless, sulky, fiending for momentum, beating rhythmically down, self-flagellating in its cosmic masturbation. Judit would have been a pagan when that counted. Judit would have cut your heart out to keep the sun masturbating. You betcha. Judit would have slayed the dragon and cooked every part. Judit would have gotten married and had children, and before that, she would have danced. She would have told her husband 'I won't marry you unless you promise that once a week we go out dancing.' She would have had no recourse after the first child, when the months passed and he never took her dancing. She would have forgotten the promise. She would have forgotten the dragon when it passed her lips. She would have forgotten why she cut your heart out. It wouldn't have mattered what she remembered. Things would have stayed the same. They only change when you eat them. You can change anything if you can fit it in your mouth.

...

In the second dream your daughter is born. It is a joke before it is a wondrous occasion. Your wife screams and writhes all through the night—first on the chair, then on your bed. Every few minutes she stops and starts. You stroke her hair and bring her soup, as if she were sick, because you can't think of anything better. All you can think is 'The reprise is in,' and this is Big News. It makes the bones of your house tremble. Repetition is in. Rebirth is in. She groans. Ad nauseum is in. Add more nauseum! The breeze mewls and rattles your shutters, smelling milk.

Student Name: Sophia Shakourifar

Grade: 9

School: Awty International School

Title: Gibberish

Category: Poetry

Key: Silver Key

Educator:

Does it make sense

No, it doesn't

Will it make sense?

Never

I'm just writing -correction- typing

It's not writing anymore

It's not original anymore

None of this makes sense

None of it makes sense

This thing, this beast

Takes away my originality

Takes away my effort

And does it in seconds

I'm tired

I'm so tired

Of proving myself

My art

My writing -correction- typing

It is not an artist, a writer, an anything

It's just taking my work, and makes it into something new

...

Which is something I do  
And others too  
Now that I think about it  
Most things aren't original  
It's all different versions of the same thing  
So,  
Maybe it isn't as strange as I  
Maybe it isn't as different as I  
But no, that doesn't make sense  
How can a beast be like me?  
How can a monster be like me?  
Am I that monster?  
No, maybe, their not a monster  
Maybe their just someone, something, who had no choice  
No opinion  
No will  
Nothing  
Like me  
Maybe I should humanize  
Maybe I should sympathize  
...  
But it's hard  
It's hard to see how they suffer  
When I suffer too  
But maybe if I listened  
Maybe if I looked  
I'd see how close we are  
I'd see how far we are

And I'd see, that this is not just cruel to me

But to them too

...

Hah! No

I hate it

I hate it

I hate it

I will never look deeper

Then beyond what is given to my hand

Student Name: Saanvi Doddaballapur

Grade: 10

School: Awty International School

Title: Girl in a Periwinkle Dress

Category: Short Story

Key: Silver Key

Educator: laurence paul

It was not completely out of the ordinary to witness suspicious occurrences at school. It was Oxford after all. The place has a precedent for such things. Nonetheless, some of the strange incidents of our adolescence end up shaping us more than we would like to admit. Such was my encounter with that little girl in a periwinkle dress, all those years ago.

I had simply been minding my own affairs, rattling off some maths formulas in front of the Bodleian Libraries and enjoying the sunny weather. The sky was crystal blue and there was a dearth of rain clouds for once. Oxford had no lack of study space indoors, but as exams were coming up I thought a breath of fresh air would do me well. My flatmate and I had had a bit of a spat this morning and he was maintaining a rather stiff upper lip regarding the matter. Yet, we were too dependent upon our amity to faithfully hold a grudge. Thus, we ended up two benches apart: me with the maths and him with a deck of playing cards. It was perfectly set to be a wonderfully uneventful day. Then, about a quarter hour into our silent disregard, she showed up.

A whirlwind of energy, spinning and skippity, coming to plop right in front of James. She was a precocious little thing, with unruly wispy blonde locks and a cheshire grin. Her delicate hands smoothed the cerulean silk of her dress that had bunched up with her tumultuous entrance. "Might I join you?" I expect my roommate was rather shocked by this drastic turn of events and responded yes only out of courtesy. I myself was surprised first, by the very presence of a girl, and then by the audacity in which she approached us. My sister... most girls, I thought, were timid and careful to approach strangers. This one was unruffled as she righted herself and passed James the cards. As they began to sort out the act of shuffling and dealing, I observed little details about their interaction. Neither of them ever even glanced my way. James's face was fighting hard to decide between amusement and irritation. The girl's open, curious expression faintly resembled one all too similar to the one I had often seen on a cherished face. My eyes shuttered closed and despite the brightness, I began to feel cold. I distantly overheard a boyish voice complaining, "You're not playing by the rules." He was being too sullen about the whole

situation. "And you're being petty. I can play how I like. Rules are for fools!" I hardly suppressed my snicker; the tosser deserved that one. A fool indeed. "The rules are how we ensure that the play is on even footing and that the victory is fair!" Frustration began to seep into his voice despite his patient words. James had no younger siblings. I had... "See, but I think it wouldn't be fair either way. But why should you care? It is, after all, just a game," the girl said bitterly. The girl slowly stood, disappointment evident in her eyes, and laid down a card in front of him. "Play by your own rules!" Somehow I felt that disappointment was directed towards me too. Guilt threatened to envelop me. I should have played cards with her. As she gallivanted away, my flatmate stared, awestruck in the general direction that she had departed from before standing up and also walking away. It took me a good minute to realise he had left the card behind and another one to note that I had never caught the girl's name. I strode to the table and flipped the card. Ace of Spades. I sprung up with the sudden resolve to demand an explanation. I was going to find that girl.

As I searched around for her, my mind wandered. She seemed very young, no older than ten years old despite her haughty attitude. But who could she have been to someone, more than five years her senior, like that? She must have been the daughter of that professor visiting from across the pond. Liddel something. It was in this fashion that I found myself standing on a path towards the music conservatory. I could faintly make out the twang of a violin echoing from within the halls. With a resolved sigh, I walked in. My feet automatically guided me towards the auditorium I noticed the chiming of voices coming from. As I opened the door, my gaze fell immediately upon Anthony, my prefect. He was in a dynamic debate with none other than the girl. "How can you say that it is ordinary blue? This is periwinkle!" she cried aghast. "Which to my point, is a shade of blue," he responded. I would have died of laughter had I not wanted to draw attention to myself. It wouldn't have mattered anyways; they were too caught up in their debate, which had now taken a curious turn. "Please, might I try?" This girl. Through some unbeknownst charm she was coercing Anthony, of all people, to let her play his violin. And to my shock, he agreed. I closed my eyes as the girl took up the violin and began to play. One second, two. "But you're not playing at all!" Anthony exclaimed. The bow rested in the crook of the girl's arm. A practice technique I believe is referred to as shadow bowing. Her fingers danced along the fingerboard, the faint echoes of notes dissipating before they could be heard. Suddenly, she stopped. "Just because you couldn't hear it, doesn't mean I wasn't playing" she replied defensively. Anthony looked at her dumbfounded. "But that is the whole point of musical expression: that others perceive its beauty too." "But just because you could not comprehend my musical expression does not make it any less real." "Of course it does!" The girl tried a different approach. "If I played croquet with a hedgehog ball and flamingo mallets, would it still be croquet?" Anthony looked as if he were about to start tearing out his hair. Perhaps the girl was a bit mental. "What does this even have to do with the violin?" The girl shrugged her

shoulders, placed the violin back in its case, and made to exit. "What ever was I thinking trying to explain emotional expressions to a teenage boy!" she muttered to herself. With one glance over my shoulder at Anthony, who was still staring solemnly at his violin, I followed.

I had hoped to corner the girl and inquire about the thought-provoking ideas she had left me with. However, my plan was thwarted by the dean. Old Oswald was not a young man anymore and took quite a fright at seeing a little girl in pigtails making her merry way across to Christ Church. I dashed to hide as I saw him blink twice at her before calling out "Miss. Miss! Stop right there!" I saw delight spark in her eyes as she made a loop and stood at attention right in front of him. It was quite a sight witnessing Old Oswald dwarf the little girl, looking straight down to meet her eyes. "Who might you be?" I could vividly picture the machination of his brain, working at break-neck speed to place her. I'll admit, I was hoping he would clarify the matter for me. Both of our thoughts were interrupted by the girl's response. "But who are you?" "I am the dean, of course." The girl shook her head vigorously with impatience. "I asked who are you, not what." "What a preposterous question. Why are you even wandering about? Surely you know that this is a boys school?" He narrowed his eyes as if to confirm she was indeed not a boy. "More's the pity," she replied. "I really must ask you to leave the grounds immediately," "But you haven't yet asked and I can't leave you here with an identity crisis! You don't know who you are!" she replied. "But, but, you're a girl!" It was truly one of the most joyous moments of my life. The imposing Dean Oswald sputtering at a child. Of course, this was no ordinary child. For the second time, I found myself wishing I knew her name." As if he had heard me, the Dean echoed, "At least give me your name so that I may contact proper authorities." "Trivial. I did not choose it, so it is not mine." "I must insist, young lady..." "Yes, but that is not all that I am! Yet you have ignored the real solution to your problem because you cannot see past the fact that I am a girl." Oswald's jaw was agape moving up and down as he tried to come up with a retort. "I'll be on my way now. I'm a bit late for a tea party. I do hope you figure out who you are." I could swear she met my eyes in that second and smiled. She bid Oswald farewell and continued on, skipping away into the distance.

I hardly remember when I made the decision to walk up to the dean and confront him about that encounter. "Hello, professor. Who was that girl?" He looked at me confusedly, "What girl?" "The one you were just talking to!" "My dear boy, I have not talked to anyone but you." "But I could swear..." "Exams are coming up and you have been studying avidly. Perhaps you would do well with a break." With that tidbit and a pointed look, he walked off. A sense of unease crept upon me. I had for sure not imagined her. I raced down the path towards the conservatory and stormed into Anthony's practice room. "What's all the racket about?"; he asked, clearly irritated. "Do you remember there being a

girl in here?" "Don't be absurd. A girl?"; he scoffed. "Was there anything real you wanted to speak with me about?" "No, I'm well, truly"; I responded hastily. Something was really wrong here. I could not have imagined it. Impossible. Last time...I sprinted towards the bench in front of the library, relieved to see James back at the bench. He certainly would not be involved in this elaborate prank against me. "James! Do you remember a girl playing cards with you this morning?" He looked up at me, clearly astonished. Our prior animosity was clearly extinguished by my panicked face. "I wish. A distraction would be much appreciated. But there are no girls anywhere near here. Are you well? It has been a while since we went out for a lark..." He had no recollection. Nobody did. Was I insane? Did I finally go off the deep end? Was she ever real? They say grief...No. What had the girl said? Reality should not have to follow rules. Reality needn't be understood by everyone. And not everything needs a name to be known. Maybe I was insane but oh, what a relief that would be!

To this day I still feel the slight twinge of guilt referring to her as The Girl, because that is not the moniker she would have wished for herself. I think it was her who helped me cope with the loss of my sister, which was, undoubtedly real. She helped me understand that everyone's reality is different and the expectation we place on individuals to conform to a standard one is what makes us unreasonable. Still no one can remember her ever being present during our time at school. Every time I mention her, I receive odd glances and whispers of "delusional" under others' breaths. To them of course, she had never been real, nor had any of the words of wisdom she had bestowed upon them. But she had been real to me, and isn't that all that matters?

Student Name: Chanya Methaprayoon

Grade: 9

School: Awty International School

Title: Gnomenreigen

Category: Poetry

Key: Silver Key

Educator: Ana Ebie-Mouton

They huddle holding hands, in a circle.

Fifteen of them, jubilant, excited,

light, skipping, united in their movements, perfectly, magically synchronized

like that one scene in Trolls

but with cuter, more nimble gnomes.

I fell in love.

It's a nightmare to learn.

I guess the gnomes are dancing, but

they must be really sore afterward, I mean,

I sure am –

It feels like they're struggling to lift their feet,

dancing to their deaths,

toppling off a cliff.

But, "it's a concert étude,"

says my piano teacher.

“‘Dance of the Gnomes’,

make it look easy, like

you’re putting no effort into making it sound this good.

It’s a psychological thing!”

If only it were that easy –

Drill them a thousand times

dotted rhythms (da, da-dum, da-dum, da-dum)

stop on that one note (dadadadaDA                      dadadadaDA        )

staccato short (! ! ! !)

heavy ( )

light ( )

lighter (

lighter

These octaves.

My arms feel like cold, stale half-cooked noodles.

As tense as a stick but weak paper-thin floppy.

I need a break but

I can’t stop, can’t stop, can’tstop can’tstopcantstopcantstop.

That

one

repeated

gosh dang low

left-hand

D

SHOUTS

CLAMORS FOR ATTENTION

consumes the right-hand melody

boisterous, vociferous,

Make it demure –

At night,

I lie in bed, the frigid air-conditioning chilling my mind.

The world spins and my eyes ache.

The flashy right-hand melody endlessly cycles in my spirit,

in my sleep,

in my dreams.

Fake it till you make it.

It becomes a mantra,

the sparkly, sinister lie of my life.

But... I love it.

Yeah, it's a psychological thing.

I'm waiting for the technique, the sound to come  
but all that comes is water,  
the kind that spills out of my eyes  
in torrents of frustration.  
All that comes are excuses,  
Can't play this because my hand span is too small.  
Should I wait until next year to perform this piece?

But I love it, love it, love it so much.  
My heart races hard every time I catch a wisp of  
that scintillating, shimmering, sparkling soprano.  
that perfectly imperfect harmony change.  
that mischievous flitting, glinting pixie  
that one yearning, reaching rolled chord  
that  
that.

the  
ephemeral gleams of light  
in the midst of eternal night

relationships are complicated, i guess

Showtime.

A year later

these creatures have still not  
completely mastered  
the moves...

The audience's applause soothes me  
as I take a bow with (semi-) confidence

But as I begin the first notes  
The sky shimmers with their charisma.  
I am poised... ready.  
I am ready.  
Magic is afloat in the air, beckoning...

Come, listeners; come hear my story.

Student Name: Rory Colgin  
Grade: 9  
School: Awty International School  
Title: Halloween Night  
Category: Short Story  
Key: Silver Key  
Educator: Ana Ebie-Mouton

"You've gotta go," Mama said.

I threw myself back on my bed. "Mommy, please," I begged.

She shook her head. "You're too old to be calling me Mommy."

I pulled Julia against my chest. "She doesn't want me to go." She purred and butted her head against my cheek.

"You can take her with you," she said.

"No way! I'm not bringing them there!"

"I don't know what to tell you. You have to go to Dad's."

"I won't! I won't do it!"

Mama sighed. "Magnolia," she said seriously.

"What?" I snapped.

"Well... Maggie, I don't know what to tell you. You're going, end of discussion."

"I'll tell Mia on you," I shouted after her. She shut my door behind her.

"You're too old to be acting like this!"

Mia slinked into my room as soon as Mama left. "I'm not going to defend you."

"Please," I pleaded.

"You're going to have fun. It'll be Halloween tomorrow, you love Halloween!"

I pouted. "Please don't make me go, Mia."

"I'm Lilith when you're acting like a child."

"Fine." I stood up. "Your nickname privileges have been revoked."

"Okay, Magnolia."

"I won't call you Mia... You can't call me Maggie... You can't pet my cat..."

"Okay, Magnolia," she said again.

Daphne came out of the closet wearing her jammies. She sat down on the trundle bed with her shark stuffy wrapped tightly in her arms. "Nola?"

"Daff?" I replied.

"I think you should see your dad," she declared. She hugged her stuffy tighter.

"I think you should mind your own business."

"If I didn't see Mia for a million years, I'd want to see her."

I shook my head. "It's different. Me and my dad aren't like you and Mia, or Mama, or anybody."

"I don't think it's different at all."

"What do you know? You're seven."

"Mama says I'm very mature for my age."

"Yeah, you're a strange little girl, but you're still a little girl."

Daphne pouted and crossed her arms over her chest. She puffed herself up like a bird flaunting her feathers. "I don't like when you talk down to me."

"I don't like when you stick your nose places it doesn't belong."

She tucked herself in under the thin bed sheet, I put another blanket over her and kissed her forehead.

"Nola?"

"Daff?"

"I love you."

"I love you more."

We woke up at the crack of dawn that morning to pack my suitcase. Then we went downstairs, I made her french toast, and we watched cartoons until Mama shoed me into the car.

"You just want me gone," I huffed.

Mama sighed. "I never send you to your dad's, just this one time. Daphne is going to Uncle Marko's. At least you have your own bed, Daphne has to share a room with Rosaline." I loved Rosaline. Rosaline was my baby cousin, barely a year old, with the biggest cutest baby eyes and the sweetest little laugh.

I crossed my arms. "Mama, he has eight children. Eight! Who in their right mind has eight children, Mama?"

"Magnolia, please." She sighed. "You're acting like a child."

"I won't ever forgive you. You're going in a home!"

She sighed again. "Get comfortable, we have another hour in the car."

The hour passed swiftly, fields and forests passing by, with herds of cows and horses populating the space.

The car rolled up into the driveway, crackling on the gravel.

Dad's house was sprawling. Where house ended, forest began. I hated this house. The outer walls varied between stone, stucco, and brick depending on when it was built. They had to add on constantly to make room for their hellspawn.

"I can't believe you're making me go. It's not too late to turn back--"

"Get out," Mama said. She stopped the car in the driveway.

I got out and lugged my suitcase out of the trunk.

Mama followed. She gave me a big hug and shoved me forward towards the front door. "I love you. I'll miss you."

"I love you too," I mumbled. My toes dragged against the gravel, scuffing my shoes, but it was a small price to pay to make sure everyone watching understood my indignance.

Sophie opened the door with a trail of children behind her. The youngest one didn't look a thing like my dad, but a great deal like Sophie- dark and tan with long brown hair. The twins looked just like my dad.

I counted them one by one. There were six of them. Two boys, four girls. Two brunettes, three blondes, and a ginger.

One of them slipped out the door and wrapped itself around my legs. I didn't think I had seen it since it came out of the delivery room, and I wasn't sure which it was. One of the twins, Rose or Violet, the blondes.

The ginger was the first to leave the gathering at the front door. She bounced up the stairs.

"Erica, come back!" Sophie said. "Greet your sister."

"Hi!" she shouted behind her, and disappeared into the second floor.

The blonde child wrapped around my legs pushed itself off. It chirped, "I'm Rose. Did you know that I'm Rose already?"

I nodded and stepped inside. The blast of stuffy hot air hit me like a freight train. It was evident how old the entry hall of the house was by the lack of modern amenities, like air conditioning and restrooms (all consolidated in the newer parts). As I walked through the halls, decorated fully but still housing a soulless quality, I shifted between bouts of sweat and goosebumps from the cold. Sophie disappeared soon after greeting me.

The art on the walls changed, from impressionism to surrealism to pointillism with no discernible cohesivity. The walls were warm-colored while many paintings were bright and cool-toned and jumped out horribly.

The blonde child appeared behind me. "Magnolia!" it cried.

"Yes?"

"Come see Poppy!"

"No, I'm just looking for my bedroom."

"Daddy said you're going to share one with Ivy." It chewed its thumb nail, making the pink nail polish flake away. "I like your necklace."

"Thanks."

"Where did you get it?"

"At a carnival."

"Where?"

I sighed. "Vermont."

"When?"

"A year ago."

"How did you buy it? Do you have a job?"

"My brother bought it for me."

"Your step-brother?"

"My brother."

"Where are you going?"

"There's a guest bedroom somewhere," I muttered.

I found a guest bedroom soon after that, where the blonde child sat irritatingly talking to me, rocking back and forth, legs criss-crossed.

"Do you like living with your mom?"

"Yes."

"Do you like your other step-mom?"

"Yes."

"Do you and your step-brother get along?"

"Yes."

"Do you and your other little sister get along?"

"Yes."

"Is she the same age as me?"

"A year older."

"Dad says I act like I'm three years younger."

"Okay."

"I don't think he likes me very much. I don't think he likes anyone very much."

"Okay."

"Do you feel the same way? That he doesn't like you very much?"

I shrugged. "I'm going to change. Go play."

"Bye, Maggie," she squeaked. "Does your mom call you Maggie? Or Nolia? Nola is easier to say."

"I'm going to change into pajamas. I've been out all day and I'm tired."

"Bye, Magnolia."

I shut the door behind her. From my suitcase, I unloaded two small Halloween decorations— hanging skeletons. Neither were realistic, both barely the size of a twelve-year-old, one with light-up eyes. I taped over the LED lights with dark electric tape and packed up my kit; air-dry clay, fake blood, a knife, dishes, and a paintbrush.

There was not a soul in sight when I snuck out back into the forest. I was tall enough to get over the fence by lodging my foot through the chain link and swinging my other leg over the top. Everything I packed was stuffed in a duffel bag and slung over my shoulder.

I laid out the skeletons first, against a tree with the sleeping bag open and crumpled near them. Then, I created flesh with clay and sculpted it to perfection with my butter knife. I caked the dishes in dirt and mud before scattering them around the scene. I finished it off with strategically placed fake blood.

I was sitting in the guest bedroom by the time Sophie called me for dinner. “Magnolia, supper time!”

I sat at the table, in the seat with an MM painted on the back. I assumed it was mine, since I was the only one with those initials and I saw first an IH for Ivy Harriet and WL for William Laurence, so I assumed the other initials were for the other children. The DAD chair was at the head of the table, and the MOM chair next to that. The IH chair was at the opposite head, the one facing away from the mounted TV.

“Magnolia, are you settling in alright?” Sophie carved out an awkward piece of steak, leaving a hole in it like a jigsaw puzzle.

“Just fine,” I croaked.

She smiled. “I’m glad. I know it can be loud here. It’s sort of inevitable.”

I nodded politely and shoveled food into my mouth.

At home Mama made dinner every night and she was a much better cook. I didn’t think I’d ever eaten the same meal twice, with main dishes and sides considered, but it was always delicious and always made with the expertise of someone who had assembled the meal a thousand times before. Sophie’s steak was tough and her mashed potatoes (which I didn’t like very much in their own right) tasted like printer paper.

Dad sat in his assigned seat like a figurehead. He grabbed the remote with a mouthful of mashed potatoes and clicked on the football game. He didn’t say a thing. Nothing like I remembered him, loud-mouthed, talkative, with a never-ending stream of self-involved things to say. He was substanceless, like an empty husk of the person he was.

The dinner table was dead. Ours was never this silent and we had half the people.

At home Mama would summon us to the dinner table. Our plates would already be on the table in the places we always sat, no name tags needed. Heath and I would have sopping wet hair since we showered after volleyball practice, and we would regale Mama, Mia, and Daphne with stories from our days. Daphne would explain all the hot first-grade gossip.

Poppy had been sitting next to me the whole time, I could feel her sock on my leg, and when I moved her foot came with me. She had no idea what she was missing out on, with her sad, quiet, unseasoned dinners.

Ivy’s head was ducked low to keep the TV unobstructed. She ate almost directly off her plate like a dog. I could see the sauce and potatoes soaking into her hair.

"May I be excused?" Rose tweeted.

"Yes," Sophie said. "Go take a bath and put on your pajamas."

"Mom, can I-"

"You're excused." She gestured upstairs with her fork. Rose left.

I hopped out of my seat. At home, once one person left, everyone else was released.

"Magnolia," Poppy warned.

"I'm gonna take a bath, don't worry!"

"No, you ask to be excused before you get up." Ivy stayed hunched over as she spoke.

"May I be excused?"

Dad roared to life to say, "No. You can wait until the rest of us are done."

I attempted to catch Sophie's eye— it was a page from my usual playbook. Mia and Mama played good-cop-bad-cop whenever they were upset. It kept the balance. But this wasn't that, it was bad-cop-sad-cop. Sophie kept her face down in her sad jigsaw-puzzle steak and her printer paper potatoes.

I slinked away, and locked the guest room door behind me.

Knock knock. Knock knock. Knock knock knock. Knockknockknockknockknock.  
KNOCKKNOCKKNOCKKNOCKKNOCK-

"What?!" I exclaimed.

"Magnolia!" Rose shouted.

I unlocked the door and slammed it right behind her. "What is it?"

"I want to look at your necklace again. What's in it?"

"It's a sapphire."

"But it's pink."

"It's a pink sapphire."

"Are you sure?"

"Positive."

The sun appeared behind the mesh blinds, jolting me awake that Halloween morning. My costume wasn't scary that year, I wore a red dress with cheap devil wings and horns, since Heath was an angel.

I left my room with the expectation that my indiscretion the night before would be ignored and all was well. It was a new day.

"Daddy's mad at you," one of the twins told me. She hugged my leg when I came downstairs. "I'm Rose."

"I know," I lied. "Rose, do you want to see something cool?"

She nodded, but her face was twisted up in apprehension. "But, Daddy's mad—"

"I don't care. You want to see something cool?"

"Yes," she declared. All anxiety had left her body, she was confident as ever.

"Go get Violet and Timothy and I'll show you something cool."

"Where?" Her eyes were like big gleaming saucers when she looked up at me.

"In the woods."

She shuddered, but frolicked off to find the other children. Only Violet returned with her. I put a taser in my jacket pocket, in case someone was wandering around out there or a wild animal got too close.

I stood in front of the couch, arms crossed over my chest.

Mama, Mia, Dad, Sophie, Ivy, and Poppy were gathered around like it was a show. I could see the younger children hiding behind a wall, but no one believed me when I protested.

"They need to leave." Mama pointed at Ivy and Poppy.

"They're fine where they are," Dad hissed. He turned his attention to me. He was a big man, enormous and built, and most people found him intimidating. I didn't. I hardly found anyone intimidating.

"Nothing's happening until they leave," she insisted. "Sophie too."

Sophie stood up solemnly and shooed Ivy and Poppy away.

"Thank you." I sighed in relief.

"No," she snapped. "Do not thank me, what you did was very wrong. Very wrong."

I shrugged. "It was just a prank! I was just messing with them!"

Rose and Violet giggled as I hoisted them over the fence. Their clothes got muddy when they dropped to the ground, but they didn't care, not one bit.

"What's the really cool thing?" Rose hopped back and forth between her feet, letting the mud cover her shoes.

I snatched up their hands and led them towards my masterpiece. "I found it yesterday, I went out exploring."

"Spelunking?"

"No, that's in caves, silly." I laughed and kept walking until I spotted the bright red of my tent behind the thickets of trees and bushes.

"What could be so cool in the woods? Mom says we're not supposed to come out here," Violet squeaked.

Dad's face was bright red. Sweat boiled off his forehead.

"I'm sorry. I didn't think it was a big deal," I repeated.

"You are disrespectful, and out of line, and it stops right now," he screeched. "You can't pull stunts like this--"

"I didn't mean to scare them so much, I thought it was funny! Daphne would laugh. She would laugh, right?" I turned to Mia and she stared exasperatedly back at me.

"Rose and Violet aren't Daphne." Mama pinched the bridge of her nose.

"I found it when--"

"What is that?!" Violet shrieked. She took off sprinting towards the house.

Rose stared in horror at the destroyed campsite. She squeezed my hand, inching backwards.

"Violet?!" I bellowed. "Violet! Come back, you'll get lost!"

Rose squealed as barks and yips echoed in the distance. "Magnolia? What's that noise?"

"I don't know." I scooped her up and tried to make my way towards the house, searching for Violet.

I could feel Rose's rapid heartbeat. The animal noises loomed above, around, they closed in on us.

"Even if they were like Daphne, you went out in the woods by yourself! There are foxes and coyotes and bobcats and wild animals, Magnolia!" Mia exclaimed. "That one was too close to you, you never should have gone that far out."

"It should have ripped you apart. Then maybe you would learn your lesson," Dad wailed. Mama rounded on him. She spoke through her teeth, stabbing her finger into his chest. He jolted each time, taking small steps backward, keeping his chin up so as not to appear weak.

I noticed Mia stick her leg out to trip him, avoiding eye contact so I wouldn't mistake her disdain for him as agreement with me.

I couldn't make out a thing Mama said. She turned back to me and ordered, "Maggie, pack your things."

"We're leaving?"

"We're leaving."

I scurried upstairs before Dad blocked my path. I tossed clothes and toiletries into my bag. My toothpaste could leak if it wanted to, my shampoo could leak if it felt like it, I didn't care because in three hours I would be home. Where I could borrow Mama's car and go get coffee at a chain coffee shop that didn't bother with stores in the goddamn hinterlands.

Rose appeared in the doorway. "Are you leaving already?"

"Yes."

"Do you want to leave?"

"Yes. Come here."

She sank to the floor and started folding my clothes. "It's only been a night," she sniffled.

"I know, but I have to go home with my mom," I whispered. "But you can call me. And I'll come out and see you. I'll pick you up and we'll go on a road trip!"

She studied my face until she decided I was serious, and she beamed.

I tucked her hair behind her ears. "I'll miss you."

"I'll miss you too. You'll visit soon right?"

"Of course. Next weekend. Be ready at seven sharp."

She giggled.

Mama and Mia were waiting at the front door for me. We hopped in the car, wedged between suitcases and cardboard boxes from assorted projects. The car sped away.

Student Name: Sophie Zhang

Grade: 9

School: Awty International School

Title: Identifying Red Flags According to Hills Like White Elephants

Category: Critical Essay

Key: Silver Key

Educator: Margaret Tung

"What should I do?" my friend asked, checking her pulse. She always did this when she felt nervous. I shoved my Romeo and Juliet book in my bag and zipped it closed before giving my friend a sympathetic nod, prodding her to explain. Around us, locker doors slammed as we spoke in hushed tones. She swiftly recounted the story of how one of our classmates had asked her out on a date. I smiled widely, excited for my friend, and immediately followed up by asking her who the lucky guy was. As soon as I heard his name though, I was crestfallen. I had worked with him before on a group project and he had refused to let anyone else in our team speak, instead bragging about how good he was at basketball, how tall he was, and even how large his hands were. Though I wanted to support my friend in whatever she decided, I warned her of some of the difficult behaviors I had observed. Some of those behaviors I noticed are best characterized as yellow flags, which are "things that pose the potential of being red flags in the future, but can typically be resolved." (Gonzales). Although seemingly innocuous, yellow flag behaviors can turn into red flags such as lying, not respecting boundaries, excessive criticism, and controlling behavior.

Ernest Hemingway explores these traits in his short story "Hills like White Elephants." Throughout the course of the story, written almost entirely in dialogue, a man and his girlfriend discuss their future amidst the news that the woman is pregnant. After a certain point in the story, the man becomes manipulative, passively aggressively forcing his girlfriend to get an abortion--a classic example of controlling behavior. While a disagreement between a couple does not necessarily always give rise to manipulative conduct, Hemingway illustrates that an argument can signal red flag behavior when one person obscures the facts and unfairly assigns blame to another person.

The boyfriend in Hemingway's story becomes manipulative when he does not permit his partner to fully consider the benefits and drawbacks of a potentially life-changing decision. When the author first introduces the man and his girlfriend, the couple is having drinks at the bar, gently ribbing each other:

"Oh, cut it out."

"You started it," the girl said. "I was being amused. I was having a fine time."

“Well, let's try and have a fine time” (Hemingway 101).

Phrases like “cut it out” and “you started it” are playful, even childish, arguments that allude to the flirtatious banter of the couple. Up until this point, the couple’s conversation is fairly surface level, and appears to resemble light bickering. Soon, however, the man brings up “[letting] the air in,” a euphemism for abortions, saying, “It’s really an awfully simple operation, Jig” (Hemingway 101). He then goes on to call the operation “really not anything” (Hemingway 101). In this case, the man, who is not a medical expert on the topic of abortions, is making the operation seem much less risky than it actually is. Not only is he failing to extend any empathy towards the emotionally charged decision and potentially painful procedure that she would have to undergo, but also he is deliberately making it seem as if she will come out of the medical procedure without any complications. By “[s]pinning the facts[,]” emotional manipulators “change your perspective” through employing techniques like “omitting information” or “downplaying facts” (“Are You Being”). By portraying the procedure in an oversimplified manner, the man in the story is manipulating her into doing what he wants instead of letting her weigh the ramifications of the procedure on her body.

The man continues to emotionally manipulate Jig when he pushes fault onto her without taking responsibility for his part. From the story, we can assume he is the father of the unborn child. Yet, rather than owning up to his actions, he dangles the status of their relationship in front of his partner. He starts by sweetly assuring Jig that he’ll “go with [her] and ... stay with [her] all the time” (Hemingway 102). While he seems to offer her comfort, the sentiment is not actually genuine. He later implies that her pregnancy is a source of stress for him and for their relationship. When she asks him if he will love her after the operation and treat her more kindly, he responds, “You know how I get when I worry” (Hemingway 102). By subtly hinting that his affection will wane if she does not terminate the pregnancy, he is effectively toying with her emotions: Should she keep the baby and risk losing the relationship? Or should she go through the procedure to keep her boyfriend happy? This manipulative tactic puts immense pressure on the girlfriend, making her believe that her decision will determine the fate of their relationship. According to licensed therapist Jamie Cannon, “If instilling [fear](#) can successfully pressure someone to comply, manipulators need to take advantage of that response” (Cannon). In making Jig feel like his love is conditional on her going through with the procedure, he is exploiting her desire to keep him happy in hopes that he will stay in their relationship and treat her better.

A healthy discussion between the couple would not involve inserting conditions and clever wording that would push the blame onto the other person. Instead, a balanced discussion would involve opinions from both sides, mutual understanding, and both sides doing their best to keep their emotions in check. Hemmingway’s portrayal, for the most part, is one-sided. We have an inadequate insight on what the woman wants or what she thinks of the abortion. Another way we can tell the woman’s voice isn’t heard in

making the decision is the fact that she is constantly seeking reassurance from the man. For example, she says, "If I do it you won't ever worry?" (Hemingway 102). Hemingway imbues the girl with a sense of innocence and naivete bordering on helplessness. In this case, the woman seems more concerned about the man's feelings regarding the decision than the fate of herself and her unborn child. This dependence on his opinion implies a power imbalance and suggests that the final decision may be more influenced by his desires than hers. Yet, such an interpretation may be unfair considering her words could belie more internal complicated feelings. Indeed, I would have liked to have an insight into the woman's point of view, even if she doesn't get to express it.

The effect of red flag behavior, such as projecting guilt onto a romantic partner, can be emotionally damaging and can erode a romantic partner's self-esteem and confidence. Individuals should recognize and reject manipulative tactics in order to make decisions that are truly in their best interest. As for my friend, she gave the boy who asked her out a chance, but quickly discovered that he was not a good match for her. In the end, I'm glad she was able to make her own decisions and explore her romantic desires and boundaries. And despite the limitations with Hemingway's story, it does--on a basic level--teach young men how not to treat their partners and teach women how to spot red flags amidst the bumpy hills of relationship ups and downs.

Student Name: Konrad Tittel

Grade: 10

School: Awty International School

Title: Mathematics and Writing: A Forgotten Duet

Category: Personal Essay & Memoir

Key: Silver Key

Educator: Amanda Wood

### Mathematics and Writing: A Forgotten Duet

When one thinks of the word “math,” what is the first image that comes to mind? Perhaps it is nonsensical sequences of numbers and arithmetic, yielding no coherent form nor underlying significance, depressing the very paper they rest on. Or perhaps what consumes one’s mind is the roar of a monstrous system of algebraic equations, whose mere appearance sparks fear in the eyes of students simply seeking to pass the sleeping beast unscathed. Indeed, the words “beauty” or “artistry” almost never see the light of day in the face of this question. No, those are reserved for the distant world woven from strands of language punctuated by the raging flame of creativity, from the past mingling with the present: the humanities. Very few gather around the hearth of the concrete, of what we see in the world around us, of the arts, and simultaneously embrace the darkness - the abstract, the unknown, the ... scary. These two worlds live in isolation, two stems sprouting away from one another - not by their nature, but by the rash wind of society, whose unyielding gales split the brethren from their tight-knit embrace.

But there was a time when these worlds lived in harmony. It was a time when the battering winds of societal prejudice tapered to a calm breeze, a time when schooling hadn’t yet laid its rough grasp on the fragile stems linking the two brothers. Philosophy, the arts, mathematics; they all danced alongside one another, a corps de ballet whose harmonious movements augmented each other’s beauty; the arts empowered mathematics with elegant patterns and creative flair, while philosophy grounded both in existentialism and the acceptance of their being. Yet rather than seeking to overpower the other, they thrived in a symbiotic relationship, constantly drawing from one another the coveted nectar that drives the very gears of humanity itself: inspiration. Chasing this grail, mathematicians like Euclid and Aristotle blurred the lines between the concrete and the abstract, between the shackles of mathematical law and the liberation of creative flare, traversing through fantastical landscapes whose rigid structures concealed ecosystems brimmed with infinite fascination. Liberated and unrestrained, the Phoenix unfolded its wings from the ashes of the unknown, engulfing the world in fiery wonder.

Yet now, only a thin sliver of this once rich bond remains. Indeed, there were days when I too succumbed to the virulent grips of this war. I recall sitting at my desk to delve into a math problem, feeling the oppressive gaze of the paintings looming over me, and wincing at each shriek of disgust rising from the discordant pile of unfinished works atop my desk. And, every time, I felt the tension grow, threatening to rip my very essence apart as I desperately tried to sew the two together. It was a civil war untamed, taking place between the two parts of my being that I held most dear: mathematics and writing.

I suppose I can't blame myself for letting this civil war wreak havoc before my eyes. The Covid pandemic had changed me, shaped my identity in a way that only my future self could truly comprehend. I lay suspended in a state of indecision, a limbo. As a result, my desire to taste passion was accentuated, lost in a perpetual search to ground itself in something it could call home. Thus, when I truly discovered math following the advent of the pandemic - past the standardized nonsense preached in schools, I latched onto it with my very soul. Without this mere concept that I sacrificed my entire being to, I was lost in a world whose concrete brightness blinded me, and so I took to the vacuous caves of abstraction, embraced its cool darkness against my skin. I survived with no hearth, no flame, ... no hope?

In parallel with this growing obsession with math, my vague affinity for English in school quickly blossomed into intense infatuation. Behind my pristine mask woven from mathematical fanaticism - the sole facade others knew me by, I began cultivating the growth of this flower, watching as each new petal sprouted from its stem. Yet slowly the murky shadows cast by my facade began to wither those petals, and I watched as they helplessly fell to oblivion. What I loved most had become a weapon, enslaving my newfound passion to the abyss.

It was then that I decided I needed a way out. I began to embrace the beautiful patterns emerging from the equations, tying them together by strings of language and pungent emotion. Gradually, the arbitrary symbols forged from my pen felt less foreign, tethered to reality by my newfound writer's voice. Then holes began to form in my facade, and - empowered by this influx of confidence - the once sulking flower soared upwards with vigor, shattering my facade. My discovery gifted me with something integral to my life to this day: the freedom to be, to express.

Student Name: Abril Bruzos  
Grade: 8  
School: Awty International School  
Title: No esta bien  
Category: Poetry  
Key: Silver Key  
Educator: Ana Ebie-Mouton

"Aggressive"

"Border Hoppers"

"Beaner"

"Go back to Mexico!"

Not fair

Unjust

Stereotyped based on SKIN

Based on LANGUAGE

All these words can cause so much damage

People always take advantage

They say anything that comes to mind

But you can't stand up to them

Because if they are WHITE

You will never be right

Dad in front of police car

Hands behind back

For looking a certain way

My sister waiting for him in the car

Crying in the back

People killed every day  
For looking "suspicious"  
For looking "illegal"  
Cops can be just absolutely VICIOUS

In 1911  
Antonio Gómez  
Hung for looking a certain way  
Having a certain name  
Instead of time in jail  
A mob of 100 people  
Spectating, participating in his lynching  
It isn't right  
"No esta bien"

In 1931  
Mexican-Americans shoved into waiting vans  
It isn't right  
"No esta bien"

In 1945  
Sylvia Mendez  
Forced from school  
Because of her ethnicity  
Her "race"  
Her "color"  
It isn't right

"No esta bien"

The United States

Forcing Latinos out

When the U.S. is their home

The only place they've ever known

It isn't right

"No esta bien"

Hispanics with disabilities

Illnesses

Dumped on the border

Denied dignity

Dehumanized

Ordered

Abandon the place lived all their life

It isn't right

"No esta bien"

8

9

10 year olds

Shamed at school

For being "too dark"

It isn't right

"No esta bien"

"Illegal"

"Taco-eater"

"Drug-dealer"

Kids think they don't belong

Because they were told to go back to a country

That they aren't even from

It isn't right

"No esta bien"

It's not fair

NO ES JUSTO

It's not fair

Kids robbed of their culture

So they "fit in"

Parents worried

That their children will be singled out

So they don't teach them their language

To avoid people noticing and taking advantage

It isn't right

"No esta bien"

Classified as ONE thing

It's incomplete

Not finished

Too vague

Stereotypes

Labeling me as something I'm not

"Wetback"

"Pitbull"

"Build the wall"

Stop

Stop

STOP

JUST STOP.

Student Name: Sophia Shakourifar

Grade: 9

School: Awty International School

Title: OwO

Category: Poetry

Key: Silver Key

Educator:

So one day

A boy walks into a bar

And he cracks a joke

To a smokin hot hotty

She laughs fearfully and says

"Sorry, no"

He hears

"Fuck off"

So he calls her a hoe

So one day

A girl walks into a bar

And she cracks a joke

To a smokin hot hotty

He laughs and says

"Sorry, no"

She hears

"You're ugly"

So she tell him she wasn't flirting and goes off to cry

So one day

A virgin walks into a school  
And he cracks a joke  
To a tiny smokin hot hotty  
The girl looks confused and says  
"Who are you?"  
He hears  
"Fuck me"  
So he takes the girl and turns her into a woman

So one day  
A virgin walks into a school  
And she cracks a joke  
To a tiny smokin hot hotty  
The boy grins and says  
"Nice one"  
She hears  
"You're hot"  
So she touches him without him knowing

So one day  
A dead man walks into a cell  
And he cracks a joke  
The man looks at him weirdly  
"You know you're going to jail, right?"  
He hears  
"You know you're going to die, right?"  
And he cries because all he did was touch a smokin hot hotty

So one day

A dead woman walks into a cell

And she cracks a joke

The woman looks at her weirdly

“You know you're going to jail, right?”

She hears

“You know you're going to die, right?”

And she cries because all she did was touch the smokin hot hotties

Student Name: Nicolas Ramirez  
Grade: 9  
School: Awty International School  
Title: Reflection  
Category: Poetry  
Key: Silver Key  
Educator: Ana Ebie-Mouton

Images which seem so clear, yet so blurry  
Reflection that taunts clarity, reflection's aura, the obscurity  
There, the deep thoughts found habituating reflection  
The boundless mind's landscape, the infinite escapade

Silhouettes stare, dancing shadows and distant horizons  
Silhouettes stare, stare to the individual, the individual grotesque and superb  
Individuals reflecting beautiful stories and memories, both old and new  
Individuals reflecting monstrous primordial decisions, both old and new

Embracing silence deciphers the riddles the mind creates  
Ethereal reflection, reminding entities the enlightenment silence brings  
The mind unclouded, the mind uncovering deep truth  
The mind clear, the mind uncovering dormant realizations

What comes through bears harsh reality, bitter truth  
Harsh reality, the reality uttering harmonious actuality  
These dormant understandings turned awake bringing great potential  
The conscious understandings reflecting serene worlds alongside comfort

The limitless realm of possibility habituating the mirror's surface

Humanities immeasurable potential, potential which can be harnessed

An untold amount, the untold amount reflecting off

The great human spirit, the unending amount reflecting

Student Name: Sohum Potnis  
Grade: 10  
School: Awty International School  
Title: Rules Overturned  
Category: Poetry  
Key: Silver Key  
Educator: Alison Kilfoyle

My Mental Ward is a place of order and control,  
Where patients struggle and their mind take a toll,  
McMurphy the demagogue with much flair,  
Shattered the window and filled my ward with despair

Like rebellion, the glass shards flew far and wide,  
In my dominion of order they couldn't reside,  
Defiance and chaos he tried to sow,  
As I tried to protect the order we know,

I stand for structure and the rule that protect,  
For the safety of my patients, their minds to reflect,  
But McMurphy challenged my Authority,  
With his reckless acts and questionable morality,

The window was shattered, like my composure was worn,  
From that moment on my control was torn,  
The patients inspired, a rebellion had brewed,

I had no Choice but respond, to quell McMurphy's storm,  
To ensure my rigid and mechanical system could be reformed,

Yet, at that moment as the glass hit the floor,  
A martyr was born, sacrifice the patients couldn't ignore,

For the patients minds, I sought to impair,  
Their uprising and spewed chaos throughout the air,  
In the shattered glass a lesson to be learned,  
Of how madness occurs when my rules are overturned.

Student Name: Rory Colgin  
Grade: 9  
School: Awty International School  
Title: Store Sixty-Six  
Category: Short Story  
Key: Silver Key  
Educator:

Caroline covered her face with her hands.

Violet and Laura shouted over the table, waved their hands around, pointed, spit flew as they spoke.

"You know he's allergic to eggs! Don't play dumb!" Laura yelled.

"I do not! I was trying to be helpful!"

"Oh my god!" Caroline exclaimed. "Oh my god, I have an idea!"

They turned to look at her.

"What?" Laura said finally.

"To help you, like, work out your argument."

"We don't need to work it out," Violet said.

"I can't take this anymore! And it's, like, all over Tim! Come on, you can do better than him, Laura."

She huffed. "I was on your side!"

"You're going to meet me at the mall at seven o'clock sharp or I'll tell Veronica," she said.

"You don't want me to tell Veronica."

Violet scoffed. "We're not scared of Veronica--"

Caroline took her phone out of her pocket. "You're not?"

"No, no, no, I'll go! I'll be there!"

"That's what I thought," she replied. She stood up. "I will see you at seven. I'm going to be, like, sick tomorrow, so you won't see me at school."

Violet pouted.

"Veronica is a bad influence on her," Laura muttered.

"We're fighting!" She got up and stormed away.

\* \* \* \* \*

Caroline sat down in front of the cookie shop with two sleep masks on the table in front of her. Violet came from the left side, Laura came from the right. They stood around the table.

"Come here," she said.

Before either could react, Caroline had snapped the sleep masks over their eyes and hopped off her chair.

"Caroline—"

"Give me your phones."

They reluctantly handed them over.

"Caroline, what—"

"Explain again, like, why you're fighting."

"She's trying to date my brother!" Violet spat.

"She made him hate me, 'cause she put eggs in the cookies I made for him."

"I thought you forgot them!"

Laura scowled. "Don't lie, Violet."

"Caroline, let go of me!"

She did. "Stay there. Don't move."

"I'll move if I want to move," Violet snapped.

"Veronica is at the Cinnabon a few stores down, I can—"

"No, no, no, there's no need. I'll stay still."

A myriad of clicks and clacks came before a loud slam and Caroline's voice through a speaker. "You can, like, remove your blindfolds now."

They pulled off their masks. They were standing in the middle of a clothing store. It was small, crammed full of racks and mannequins wearing leather skirts, sequin dresses, and wired blouses. There was an empty check-out counter in front of them, and behind them was a locked door with the OPEN sign facing in. The metal gate was locked outside.

"Caroline?" Laura called. She whirled around.

"Caroline? Caroline, where are we? Where are you?"

"You're in Store Sixty-Six," Caroline's voice came from above. "You're locked in, but if you, like, solve the puzzles and find the key, you can, like, make it out before the mall closes and I have to leave."

"What? Leave?"

"You have an hour to get out before you're stuck in here. Forever."

Laura exclaimed, "Caroline, you wouldn't-"

"Forever."

"Fine, fine, what do we need to do?"

"I said solve the puzzles. Oh my god, use your listening-ears," Caroline replied. The speaker crackled as she tuned out.

Laura studied the room. "Do you think she hid a key somewhere?"

"We're not on speaking terms," Violet muttered. "But no, she wouldn't make it that easy."

\* \* \* \* \*

Veronica and Caroline sat in a dark room filled with computer screens for each escape room.

"Come here." Caroline leaned over the computer, wide-eyed.

"What are you doing?" she asked.

"Violet and Laura are fighting so I locked them up in Store Sixty-Six."

Veronica grinned. "For real?"

She checked the microphone to make sure it was off. "They think it's, like, an actual store."

"How long is that going to last?" she asked. She stared along with her. Violet and Laura scrambled on opposite sides of the room, shaking down mannequins and unfolding clothes.

"Forever. They're not very, like, observational."

"Observant?"

"Whatever. Same difference."

"This is the best job I've ever had," Veronica muttered. She chewed on her necklace, watching the room intently.

"It's, like, the only job you've ever had."

"Shut up," she said. She rolled her chair back to the other side, where the room she was watching was on the screen.

"Caroline!" Laura and Violet exclaimed.

She beamed at the screen and pressed down the button. "Yes?"

"I need a hint," Laura said.

"No, you don't." She switched the microphone back off.

"Harsh." Veronica chuckled. "Are you going to let them out at the end?"

"We'll see." Caroline squinted at the screen. "I'll let them out when they stop being angry at each other."

\* \* \* \* \*

Laura frantically unfolded every piece of clothing, leaving piles across the floor.

"Oh my god, can you not make the room a disaster?"

"Do you want to stay trapped here forever?!" she shouted.

"Why don't you just neatly solve puzzles on that side of the room, and I'll stay on this side of the room!" Violet said.

"Fine."

"Fine."

Laura stood on her side of the room, standing straight up and staring around. Behind her was a low table with clothing, mostly unfolded and strewn across the floor. Behind her, she craned her neck to see a desk with three cashier stations with a big gray door behind it, but Laura and Violet paid it no mind. It was an inventory closet and nothing more. In front of her was an out-of-place rainbow display. It was bright and colorful and stuck out like a sore thumb in the dark reds and purples of the store. The clothes on the mannequins were likewise mismatched with the clothes on the racks. "Violet, come here," she said.

"No! What do you not get about fighting? Not on speaking terms?" Violet exclaimed.

"You're being unreasonable, there's no reason for us to even be fighting."

She crossed her arms, she was fuming so violently you could almost see the steam shooting out of her ears. "Why do you even want to date Tim? He's Tim, he's the worst," she said.

"Why don't you want me to date him?" Laura threw her arms up in the air. "We'll be sisters-in-law, it'll be fun."

Violet gasped. "You're already planning the wedding!"

"It was a joke!"

"It wasn't funny!"

They turned away from each other, arms crossed. Violet tried not to stare at her side of the room. A large display with flame decals around the base blared the name 'Satanic Panic by Rose Capome.' A statue of a demon posed in one corner. She looked down, each leg was chained to the ground, each with a padlock. She heard the sound of machinery, and turned to look at Laura's side of the room.

The table had split down the middle and opened up, Laura was scooping out the contents and shoving them in her pockets. Violet huffed.

She kneeled down to study the Satanic Panic display. The lock under the statue was a letter code with five spaces. She tried 'DEMON' and it didn't unlock. She tried 'PANIC' and it didn't work. 'SATAN.' She decided to look at a different lock.

Laura was walking around aimlessly. "Do you have a lock with a key over there?"

Violet ignored her, but there was a keyhole in one of the padlocks.

She walked over and got busy with unchaining the display. The key-lock popped open, and the statue-lock followed suit.

Violet stood up, arms pressed against her sides, fists in tight balls. "Caroline! Caroline Edison, this is rigged! You like her more than me, I know it. Don't even try to pretend-"

"Try harder."

She squealed. "I'll kill you when Laura gets us out of here! I swear-"

"If you, like, don't manage to unlock anything, I won't let you out."

"Caroline!"

\* \* \* \* \*

Veronica swirled a pen between her fingers. Her feet were kicked up on the table and she leaned all the way back in her office chair. "Is this legal?"

"What? Escape rooms?"

"Putting someone in one without their knowledge or consent."

Caroline shook her head. "They'll be fine. It's fine."

"Okay..."

"What? What was that 'okay' about?" she exclaimed. "Do you think something will happen?"

"I think it's a bit of an overreaction, that's all."

"I never overreact. You overreact."

"To what?" she snapped. "Caroline, you're the most dramatic person in Devil's Cove. In the most affectionate way possible, of course, but—"

She didn't answer. "It's fine. I'll let them out when they're, like, friends again."

"Are you sure it's not wrongful imprisonment?"

"It can't be, I don't even know what that is."

Veronica shook her head. "If anyone asks, it was all me."

"That was the plan anyway," Caroline replied enthusiastically.

She sighed. "We're like Bonnie and Clyde if Bonnie never did anything and just took all the blame."

"Why are you Bonnie?"

"Because we both have a leg injury. She got it from a car accident, with acid or something, and had a limp for the rest of her life," Veronica said matter-of-factly.

"You don't have a leg injury, you have a scrape on your, like, knee." Caroline rolled her eyes.

"It's probably infected, you made me stay at the bonfire even though I was wounded."

"You see? This is, like, what I mean when I say you overreact."

\* \* \* \* \*

Violet stared at the four-letter padlock. She scrambled the dials at random.

"Have you tried 'HELL'?" Laura asked.

"Of course I have!" Violet snapped, but she hadn't. The lock popped open.

"Was I right?"

Violet shook her head and turned to the last padlock. The code was five numbers. Laura was already studying the room for an answer, while Violet was shaking it and hoping it was faulty.

"What's with the rainbows?" Laura asked. "It doesn't match."

"Who cares?"

"Wait, put in what I say, okay?"

"Six... Five... Four... One... Six," she said, squinting at the mannequins. The first in line was dressed in purple, the next in blue, then green, red, and purple again.

"Nope," she said. She shook her head. "Where did you get that from?"

"The colors on the mannequins, the first one is purple and that's the sixth color, so the first number is six."

Violet entered a new code, and the lock popped open in her hand.

"What was it?"

"The mannequins are violet, not purple," Violet replied. "Idiot."

"Now she'll let you out," she said cheerfully.

"Shut up," Violet grumbled.

Caroline's voice blared over the speaker. "You can, like, push the display aside now."

"You move it," Laura said.

"What? Me?!"

Laura crossed her arms. "You've been a jerk to me all day, now you pay. By moving this."

She scoffed and started to push but no matter how she oriented herself, the display wouldn't budge.

They both put their hands on the edge and pushed. And pushed. And pushed until they were standing in front of a big metal door with a keypad where the doorknob would be. Beneath it, taped sloppily on the door, four bright green sheets of paper with the letters N, A, C, I, P written on them in permanent marker.

"Nacip?" Violet said. "What the hell is nacip?"

"It must be the code." Laura said. She attempted. Angry red lights squealed at them and the door didn't open.

"Maybe it's backwards. Pican." They tried, and failed.

"Oh! Oh! I got it! Panic!" Laura exclaimed. She typed it in and the door popped open like it was weightless.

The room in front of them was small and bland, mostly filled with cardboard boxes with a floor covered in trash. It had shelves from floor to ceiling.

"Look at the clock," Caroline's voice boomed over the speakers.

Violet grabbed a little analog clock off the shelf.

"Is it a clue?"

"It's seven forty-five!" she exclaimed.

Laura's brow furrowed. "What? So?"

"She locked us in here at seven!" She was breathing heavily, Laura could almost see her heart popping out of her chest.

"Fifteen minutes? There's not even a door out of here!" she cried. She covered her face with her hands. They smeared her makeup but she didn't care. "This is all your fault, Violet!"

"Me?!"

"Yes! You're the one picking a fight, you're the one not pulling your weight! If you had solved the stupid puzzle faster we would probably be out of here by now."

\* \* \* \* \*

"Is it working?" Veronica asked Caroline. She rolled her chair over to stare intently at her screens.

"I'm starting to think maybe the pressure--"

"Was counter-intuitive?"

Caroline sighed. "You know I don't know what that means."

"It's like--"

"I don't care!" She pressed on the microphone. "Better hurry up."

"Do you think it may have been a bad idea to get involved?"

Caroline glared at her. "Veronica, they argue, like, over my head all day. All day! All day! I can't take it anymore!"

"But is locking them in a room the best choice?"

She crossed her arms. "I don't need this, like, interrogation."

"I'm not interrogating you," Veronica breathed. "I just think this may not be the best course of action."

She grumbled and puffed out her lower lip. "But you'll be on my side when they, like, get out and they're mad at me, right?"

"Yes, Caro, but--"

She shushed her. "Then we're all good- Look! Look at them--" Her eyes lit up- "Veronica! They're apologizing!"

They craned their necks to watch Violet and Laura.

\* \* \* \* \*

"Oh, Laura," Violet moaned. She sank to the ground and tucked herself under a shelf like a terrified child in an earthquake. "I'm sorry!"

"I'm sorry! There's other guys, I didn't realize--"

"No, it's not about me. I mean, my sister doesn't care. If she doesn't care, neither should I, right?" She chewed harshly on her hair. "Caroline is going to kill us. She's starving us to death. God, I never thought- Caroline! Of all people!" She rocked back and forth.

Laura sat down next to her. "I'm sorry. I'm sorry."

"I know he's allergic to eggs, I put them in there on purpose. I'm sorry, I'm sorry--"

"I know. It's okay. I'm sorry."

They repeated the phrase, over and over again.

Until a door popped open.

Their eyes shot up, to look past the Satanic Panic display and the piles of clothes in disarray. Laura clambered out of the closet, crawling on hands and knees to see Caroline standing in front of the gray door behind the cashier desk.

"Where did you come from?" Laura asked shakily.

"I decided to let you out! Out of the kindness of my heart!" Caroline exclaimed happily. She hurried away, down the hall, and into the maze of stores outside.

Violet and Laura stared, dumbfounded, at the open door in front of them.

They hobbled to their feet and made their way slowly to the door. Still sluggish, they left the room, and the mall appeared in front of them. They were dazed, until Violet had the sense to turn around and look at Store Sixty-Six behind them.

"I'm going to kill her."

"What?"

"I'm going to kill Caroline. Kill her dead."

"What are you--" Laura turned, still moving lackadaisically, until the big sign blaring DEVIL'S COVE ESCAPE ROOMS. "Oh, she's so dead."

Student Name: Sara Varela  
Grade: 9  
School: Awty International School  
Title: Talkative  
Category: Poetry  
Key: Silver Key  
Educator:

Talkative

I love to express myself

I love telling others about

My life experiences

It's soo funnn

I'm always so excited to talk

To people

I go a hundred mile an hour

As I tell the tales of life

I used to love talking

I Loved it

Until everyone started telling me

Ur such a distraction

Be quiet

Don't speak

Work

You talk too much

I'm sorry

I'll be quiet

Student Name: Leah Hwang  
Grade: 10  
School: Awty International School  
Title: The Birds Show Us the Way Home  
Category: Personal Essay & Memoir  
Key: Silver Key  
Educator: Amanda Wood

On a warm August evening in Toronto, I sit on my grandma's lap on her porch, eating blackberries that have been picked straight from the bush. I am four years old, and this is the first time I hear her story about how she is friends with the birds.

"Before the war, I lived in North Korea. Now, I was young, so I don't remember much about my life there. However, I do remember that my parents both knew we had to leave. So one day when I was nine years old, with my parents imploring me to please hurry hurry, I packed up some of my dresses and dolls—we were from a very wealthy family, you see, so I couldn't bear to leave all of my beautiful possessions behind—and fled the only home I had ever known for a new land.

"Even though I had to leave many of my favorite things in that big, abandoned house, I was the most upset about forsaking my bird, Aegiya. Oh, how I loved her! When she would fly around our garden, I could feel my arms lighten as if I too was taking off. When I released her into the trees behind our house right before we left, my tears were unending.

"We made it to South Korea safely. For that, I am grateful now—many families did not—but I was nine then, so I did not think to be thankful. Instead, I looked for Aegiya everywhere I went. I hoped that maybe, she had followed me to this unfamiliar land. That maybe, even though my dresses were no longer made of silk as smooth as a lake at dawn, and our food was no longer served on plates of gleaming porcelain, I would still have this one piece of home to comfort me. I cannot count how many times I brought my eyes to the sky to look for that brilliant flash of yellow. I never found it, but I kept hoping I would.

"Many years passed. I crossed many more borders, and in my thirties, I found myself living in Canada. I had a degree in music from Kansas University and I taught piano out of our living room to the kids in our quiet suburban neighborhood in the evenings. Though I had not lived in Korea for over a decade, I still did not feel like Canada was my home—even if nobody said it out loud, I could see it in the wrinkle of their nose when they heard me say my "r"s as "l"s and in the way my kids didn't want to take any lunches to school that smelled of "otherness" to their classmates. I found myself desperately longing for

anything to remind me of home. My dreams were haunted by yellow blurs swooping across a cloudy sky.

“One day, I took my children to McDonald’s for lunch. Back then, they thought it was absolutely the most glamorous thing they could eat—Happy Meals and PlayPlaces were the meals of a real Canadian kid. After their small greasy hands had been wiped off and our brown paper bags had been crumpled up, we walked into the parking lot to leave. Your dad was opening the car door when he suddenly gasped. “Mom, there’s a bird on the ground here!”

“I rushed around to his side of the four-door. A little bird lay crumpled on the ground, yellow feathers contrasting the asphalt. It was alive, but barely. Suddenly, I was nine again, watching Aegiya fly across our garden, leaving me behind.

“I walked back into the McDonald’s, got a box meant for a Quarter Pounder, and gently nudged the bird inside. Then we drove back home with a barely-alive bird neatly propped inside of a hamburger box. For the next few days, I took care of the bird, fed it sugar water and applesauce. It began to beat its heavy wings hesitantly, glance at me with inquisitive dark eyes, as if to ask Who are you? Where am I? What is this place? Why am I here?

“Or maybe, that was just me talking to myself.

“One morning, I woke up and walked to the back porch to find the open cardboard box empty. The scene felt familiar—my bird had flown away once again. Only this time, I did not have the chance to say goodbye.

“But for some reason, this was different. I walked inside, and I did not cry. And I did not feel the emptiness inside of me that had been there since the first time I left my home. Because that morning, I took flight with the bird.

“Science tells us that the average bird does not live more than ten years. But to this day, I still believe it was Aegiya coming to say goodbye. To tell me this: you have lived in an unfamiliar land before. Be brave, you can do it again. So I did. And you can do it too, my love.”

When I was younger, I loved this story. My grandmother, a regular Disney princess! I begged her to repeat it over and over, birds taking flight again and again until the whole tale was a blur—my magical grandmother and the birds that taught her things. Exactly what things, I wasn’t sure, but that wasn’t important anyways.

I only saw the fairytale aspects of her story without ever truly understanding the pain of homesickness and alienation that was intertwined with it. I was born in Queens, New York, and lived there until I was 7 years old. There, my culture was always accepted with open arms—it was just a given. At school, kids brought foods of all smells and textures to lunch in colorful thermoses, with no judgement being passed. I did not understand the concept

of “otherness” because here, nobody was “other.” Everyone was accepted—It was a utopia. Then, I moved to Texas.

Life was different there. Instead of curries and stews and empanadas and noodles, every kid would sit down at the lunch table with their brown paper bag and pull out a plastic-covered Lunchable, neatly stacking cracker-ham-and-cheese together. That first day at school, I sat down at the far end of the table, hoping the smell of my kimbap wouldn’t waft over to where they could smell it. I wrote myself a note to tell my mom to buy me Lunchables from H-E-B.

A few weeks later, my class was standing in the line outside the gymnasium. A kid named George began gathering a crowd. He was the class clown, and he was about to tell another one of his world-class jokes. Everyone quieted down as he prepared for his act. Slowly, he pulled the corners of his eyelids down and started to chant a song: Chinese, Japanese, skinny knees... Everyone in the class was howling with laughter. Oh George, at it with the hilarious jokes once again! And that day in front of the gym, I laughed too. I laughed because I did not know what else to do. I was in on the joke that way. And if I was in on the joke, then maybe I could forget the fact that the joke was about me in the first place.

That afternoon, I walked home from school, feeling weirdly empty. I had never felt this way before. I was learning how to laugh at all the right jokes and eat all the right things for lunch, but for some reason I still felt wrong. Like no matter how hard I tried, I would never be American enough for my classmates. Was this how my grandma had felt?

I kicked a rock along the sidewalk as I walked, then startled as a rustle of feathers alerted me to the fact that I had almost hit a bird perched on top of a crack in the sidewalk. It glared at me, affronted. I stopped in my tracks. For a second, I was almost mad that it was intact, so I didn’t have a reason to nurse it back to health like my grandmother. Maybe if I repeated all the steps in her magical story—complete with a serendipitous encounter with a bird—I too would get my happy ending. So I sat there, waiting for something to happen.

I looked at the bird. The bird looked at me.

Then it took flight.

Student Name: Clea Rose Deschanel-Pathman

Grade: 9

School: Awty International School

Title: The Edelweisses On The Other Side

Category: Short Story

Key: Silver Key

Educator: laurence paul

The edelweisses hadn't wilted yet.

Her grandchildren had brought them to her earlier that week, on a morning when the valley had been fresh with dew, and their little chubby hands had been red as they held out the bouquet to her, their clothes stained with grass. She had never loved edelweisses, not truly, until her wedding day, when her husband, appearing in the doorway, hand over his eyes but practically peeking at her gossamer dress, handed her a small spiked flower coated in white, his smile brighter than starlight.

It was good, she thought, to remember him now, at this time.

"You haven't touched your tea," Priya said softly.

Emma tore her gaze away from the little glass cup the edelweisses sat in and turned toward her daughter-in-law. She then looked down into the chipped blue mug that her fragile, wrinkled hands were holding. "I suppose I don't feel quite like drinking it," she answered simply. Yes- everything was so simple now. Why had she spent so much of her life worrying?

"Do you need anything?" her son asked, and Marie laid a hand gently on her husband's, but he kept talking. "Are you hurting? Are you cold?"

She wished she could tell this man that she birthed from her womb and raised with her bare blood that she had been hurting for the longest time, cold like a neverending winter, longing for an end that would not come. "I'm fine, Adam," Emma said gently instead. She recalled the night she and Stefan had stayed up all night thinking of names for him, only to settle on the ridiculously common name of Adam. It was not common now. It was the name of her son. It was the name Stefan had chosen.

"Are you sure you don't want the children here?" asked Emilia, arms hugging her sides. She had been in the kitchen since the babysitter came to take their children, so they wouldn't be in the house when it happened. Emma had promised to bake something with her today, but she had been so exhausted waking up, it took all she had to just stay upright in her little chair and keep her mug from spilling over.

"No, no," Emma said, clearing her throat a couple times. Her lungs felt so brittle. There was a slight tremble in her fingers when she brought up her elbow to cough into it. "I don't want them to be here. They're too young."

Emilia started crying again. Priya went to hug her, wrapping her dark skinned arms around her. Stefan had been so cruel at first about Emilia marrying her.

In retaliation, Emma stopped speaking to him, until he finally calmed down and agreed to come to the wedding. She had loved him, but at times she had not liked him. That was love, perhaps, or just the product of living with someone for so long. She had known wives less lucky than her, sworn to husbands with quick tempers and rough palms. Her aunt had been one of those women. Emma hoped she was happy, wherever she was, wherever we all go when we sink to a slumber without waking.

Adam had begun to quietly weep as well, and Emma could do nothing but watch her son lean against Marie silently. She wished she could stand up, pull these threads and gather her family around close, but she felt so small and weak. So powerless. Was this age, then? Did it strip you of the tools you once held in your hand? She had grown up in these hills, scampering from meadow to meadow, chasing frogs in creeks and watching mud splatter on her dresses. Now it was adventure enough to hobble alongside her grandchildren as she taught them the paths she once took.

"We should have thrown you a party," grumbled Martin, scratching the scraggly white beard that grew in tufts on his chin. He was younger than Emma, an old friend of the family. Stefan and him had gotten along like two peas in a pod, if both peas were men who were fond of scotch and their cars. "Should've had a DJ, some kind of disco ball. We could've worn wigs."

Emma smiled at him. "Oh, you old codger," she said. "No one discoes anymore."

"Actually," intervened Oliver from where he leaned against the wall, breathing shakily as he wiped the tears from his red, puffy eyes. "It's coming back into fashion." He tried to crack a smile but it disappeared as more salt water streamed out of his eyes.

Emma held his hands out to him, and Oliver sank into her. It was hard to imagine the baby whose diapers she had changed was now this college teen, trying hard to grow a beard and campaigning to be president of his university's D&D club.

"You have done so well," she murmured to him, holding her grandson close, and then looked around to the room filled with her family. "All of you have. I hope you know, I love all of you, so, so much."

Emilia surged forward and wrapped her arms around her, and Adam came in to hug his mother as well. Over his shoulder, Emma spotted Priya and Marie watching them from afar. She motioned with her head for them to join, and let out a frail wheeze when Martin added to the mix as well.

Arms squeezing and breath mingling, Emma thought, how simple. How simple to be here in her house, sitting in this chair built of wood well worn by her skin, near the flowers her grandchildren picked in the meadows of her childhood, surrounded by the family she had birthed and met.

The doorbell rang, a persistent little chime, and they all slowly extracted themselves, sober and silent. Emma hummed under her breath quietly, an old melody that her mother used to sing to her, as Adam and Emilia, hand in hand, descended the staircase, just like when they were little and ran downstairs to the basement because a thunderstorm had frightened them. Marie held her hand, Martin drawing close, Oliver fidgeting with an old photo book to distract himself while Priya wrung her hands in anticipation.

The doctor then entered the room, his footsteps quiet on the rug that she and Stefan had played Scrabble on for countless nights, laughing and arguing over whether something was a word or not. Emma tried to raise herself to greet him, but practically stumbled out of her chair. Priya let out an involuntary gasp and Oliver shot forward to keep her from colliding with the floor. Emma regained her balance and waved him off.

“Oh, stop,” she grumbled, but still accepted his help as she sunk back into her chair.

Emilia knelt by her side, and Emma took her daughter’s hand in hers. Priya kissed the top of her wife’s forehead while Oliver sat next to his parents, Adam grasping onto his son with one hand and the other braced on his mother’s arm.

“Ms. Arne?” the doctor called gently, undoing the clasps on his medicine bag, and Emma caught a glimpse of the syringe inside. Martin pulled up a chair for him. “Are you ready?”

Was she ready? God, what a question? She had been suffering for so long, her body slowly and steadily giving out on her in every way possible. She had seen her parents, her friends, her husband, almost everyone she’d ever known die before her. She had visited graves and left flowers. She had waited in hospital rooms and forgotten what it was like to have control of her body and her lungs. But she had also danced and sung, picked flowers and baked bread, waded water and walked trails. She had raised two children and lived to see their own children.

When Emma had been first diagnosed, all those years ago, she had known she had two choices; she could die in pain, alone in a hospital room, or she could die of her own volition, of a choice she had booked months ago, surrounded by her family, surrounded by the memories of a life that would end as a product of her own decision.

“I’m ready,” she breathed. She felt a slight poke on her forearm, and then it was like everything was going out of focus. Her children began to cry again. She squeezed their hands softly, and let herself drift off into something stranger than sleep. Her heartbeat fuzzed like static along the blurry swim of her vision, like ducking your head underwater and letting the waves carry you to shore. Except, she wasn’t sure she would end up on dry land. But perhaps death was more like a river. No back and forth of salt waves, but a

current that swept you where you were supposed to go. And where the river ended, on the other side of the bank, where the people you had buried long ago waited you, and edelweisses grew by the hundreds-

Edelweisses?

No, no, that- that couldn't be right.

Edelweisses were a protected species. You couldn't pick them. And they wilted so, so easily.

And Emma was not in her home, surrounded by her family, coming to death on her own terms. Nothing was that simple.

No, Emma was clutching the sparse blankets of her hospital bed, harsh light flickering above, the monitor next to her flatlining in the form of a path without end. Her family hadn't made it in time. Her grandchildren had never picked edelweisses for her. Her lungs were giving out and she was falling apart, her petals picked apart by winds stronger than her.

Death was a river, and she could not control the current, nor the moment she stepped into the waters.

Student Name: Aleena Shaikh  
Grade: 8  
School: Awty International School  
Title: The Glorious Squid Hat  
Category: Personal Essay & Memoir  
Key: Silver Key  
Educator: Ana Ebie-Mouton

In 2021, I was on vacation in Lake George, New York, with my family. It was a small town with lots of small shops, restaurants, and things to do on the lake. On one of the days that we spent there, my father, my sister, and I went to an arcade. While waiting in line to get tokens to play the games, we were looking at the prizes at the prize counter. That was when we saw it: a blue hat shaped like a squid. It was glorious, but we had to win five thousand tickets to get it. My sister and I decided to pool our tickets to get it, if we had enough by the end.

We focused on games with the biggest jackpots, hoping that we could rack up enough wins to get 5,000 tickets. We mostly played a game called Barrel of Monkeys, where you had to press the button at the right time to get the monkeys aligned properly in a chain, and if you linked the tenth monkey up properly, then you would win the jackpot of 500 tickets. The only problem was that the gameplay was suspenseful and tedious, and we had to try many times to get the jackpot. We played the game over and over, hoping to win the jackpot each time, until we only had enough tokens left to play one more game...

We decided that my sister should be the one to play the last game, since she had won the most games so far. My sister put the tokens in the slot to start the game, and pressed the start button. I was frozen in suspense, watching as she linked up the first monkey...

The second monkey.

The third monkey.

The fourth monkey.

The fifth monkey.

The first five monkeys were the easiest, and after my sister linked up those, I started to worry that she wouldn't be able to do it, but she stayed focused and kept going, linking up the sixth monkey.

The seventh monkey.

The eighth monkey.

We could see the golden monkey waiting behind the monkey that she was about to link, glittering brightly.

She linked up the ninth monkey.

The golden monkey was the last monkey left to be linked... My sister sat there with her hand over the button, watching it swing back and forth. She almost pressed the button, and then flinched back as the monkey swung out of her reach. The next time the monkey swung around, she pressed the button. We both inhaled sharply, hardly daring to look and see if she had done it. When we looked up, we saw the words "YOU WIN 500 TICKETS!" written on the screen, with a shower of bananas over the words. For a second, we just stood there in disbelief, watching the tickets dispensing, so many that they started forming a pile on the floor. Then huge smiles broke out on our faces. We yanked the tickets off and immediately started counting.

4,873 tickets.

We needed 5,000.

After all of that...

We still didn't have enough.

We went to the prize counter anyway, and asked the lady there if she would let us have it, despite being 127 tickets short. She said that we were close enough to having enough tickets, and she handed us the squid hat, the glorious, blue squid hat with big adorable googly eyes and dangling tentacles that came all the way down to my chin when I put it on. My sister and I took turns wearing it as we walked back to our hotel, smiling and laughing the whole way back.

Student Name: William Mouton  
Grade: 10  
School: Awty International School  
Title: The Memory of a Fallen Mind  
Category: Flash Fiction  
Key: Silver Key  
Educator: Amanda Wood

I am fifteen years old, but I was ten when my mother died. She was a sophisticated woman, and every word that flowed out of her mouth had a distinct quality, unlike any I'd heard before. I vividly recall the agonizing wait in that hospital room for news after the accident. I was just a little boy, my arm tightly bound in a sling. I remember my dad pacing right beside me, muttering under his breath. His ankle was sprained, but it was evident that he cared little about his injury, just as I did not care about mine. A week later, she succumbed to her wounds. My dad and I visited her every day at five o'clock, her favorite number. I can still picture the nurse approaching us on that seventh day, her eyes fixed on the frigid floor as if they were frozen to it. I remember the dreadful news and the sobbing. It was the first time I had seen my dad, once so strong and unyielding, cry. Her death shattered him, as it did me. It happened five years ago, but I remember every detail from those moments as if they occurred five minutes ago.

On the night of the crash, my dad was wearing steel boots, and a blood-smeared white tee, and had his cherished pair of sunglasses dangling from his right hand as he paced and muttered. I have always been praised for my memory; some even say I have a gift. I've had it my whole life, so I consider it normal, perhaps even a curse. Some memories are meant to be forgotten.

As I lie in bed, scrolling through my YouTube feed, I eventually click on a video titled "How to lucid dream," which intrigues me despite not understanding the term. The man explaining the concept reminds me of my mother with his affirmative tone, making you believe in his words. He speaks of being conscious of your dreams and suggests thinking about what you want to dream about before sleeping. I close the tab, feeling exhausted. Glancing at the calendar, it reads March 11, 2023. While brushing my teeth, I can't help but drift back to thoughts of my mother, a habit I've developed unconsciously. Whenever she comes to mind, the same memory surfaces—skipping stones with her on the beach, her dimples appearing as her smile radiates warmth. I also remember being in the

hospital, but that's where I try to redirect my thoughts. Some memories are meant to be forgotten, so that's what I strive to do. I walk over to my bed, lay my head on the pillow, and drift off to sleep.

I wake up to my mom bringing breakfast to my room, a routine I cherish. It's my favorite—chocolate chip pancakes. "Eat up," she tells me, "We're heading to the beach now that the weather has warmed up. Who knows how long this beautiful weather will last?" She smiles and leaves my room. I glance at the clock: March 11, 2015. Savoring each bite, the rich chocolate melts in my mouth. I get dressed and join my mom downstairs, where she's engrossed in her favorite book, "Dreamers Dream," which she's read countless times. It's about a boy trapped in a dream without awareness, and she often relates it to me—soft-spoken, tender-hearted, bringing life to the world. But I know I'm nothing like that boy; I am real.

We embark on the long drive to the beach, my mom playing songs on the radio while I gaze out the window, captivated by the beauty around us—the sun casting a warm glow, the clear blue skies, and the clouds kissed by beams of light. We arrive at the beach, and my mom rushes to the water, her smile matching the brilliance of the sky. "Come on!" I run to join her, the warm sand beneath my feet. After some time in the water, we lie on the sand, gazing at the clouds. Spotting a stone, I stand up to skip it. It glides across the water twice. "Looks like you didn't inherit my skills," my mother teases. She picks up a stone and skips it, effortlessly counting the skips in my head—one, two, three, four, five, six, seven, eight, nine, ten, eleven—leaving me baffled. We have so much fun that it feels like a dream, and we lose track of time as the day fades into darkness. When we return home, the sky that once bloomed with beauty has darkened. Exhaustion hits me, and I see my mom reading her book again at the dining room table. I go upstairs without saying a word, but as I ascend the stairs, an unfamiliar feeling of regret washes over me. It's as though my moments with her are numbered. I dismiss the feeling, but it returns as I lay my head on my pillow, and I imagine a world without my mother—a world filled with devastation, endless pain, and a void that will never be filled. Morning arrives, and I wake up to my father sobbing, his eyes filled with surprise. He looks different, frail, and gray, as if he hasn't eaten in weeks. He resembles a man who has lost everything. Then it dawns on me: I am not in my room or my bed. The room is cold, much like the one where the nurse's eyes were frozen to the floor. It hits me—these are the same floors, and I am in a hospital. Doctors rush towards me, exclaiming, "He's awake! He's awake!" I notice a calendar and clock on the wall. The time reads 5 o'clock, March 11, 2034.

Student Name: Clea Rose Deschanel-Pathman

Grade: 9

School: Awty International School

Title: The Trial of God

Category: Science Fiction & Fantasy

Key: Silver Key

Educator: laurence paul

The Trial of God - Recording #548, Court Case #8,690,304

(Recording begins.)

(At this moment, we can observe what must be the entrance of God's lawyer- the fifth this week. At this stage of the proceedings, everyone else has broken down crying trying to defend him or question him. The witness for this case is seated at the stand- looking decidedly unhappy and fairly betrayed at everyone but God. God has not broken eye contact with them for the last hour. The judge clears their throat. The gavel hits the wood. The crowd sucks in a breath, and a few already have their tissues out. This is more of a tragic circus than a trial by this point, and they all know it.)

[Testimony begins. God clears its throat.]

'When the shell that became you cracked open, it screamed, asking a question.

I do not think you were supposed to say that. The others that came and went asked me many things. They laughed and smiled and cried for a bit, before wiping away those little salt trails and going about their path again. They moved forward because going back was never an option. You can't go somewhere when there's no trail leading there.

You disagreed. Do you recall? Do you remember that stern mouth and cold eyes, two feet planted and hands bunched up? Some have looked upon me and glanced in the mirror, hoping to find the telltale significance. You just spat into my face.

Where you came from, pushing past the steady poison you planted in the roots and the distrust you sewed like bloodthirsty needles through scarlet thread, there is a notion of the stages of grief. Most, when they appear at my door, go through these stages hesitantly, uncertain. The image conjures a widow waiting by the window. They call her

name softly, and where should have stood her soldier love is an empty casket and a flag. She cannot view the face of what is gone, so to her it is unreal- a foggy dream that the others tell her to grieve for, but all she can do is wonder where the body that slept next to her each night has gone.

You did not mourn like a widow, however. Your emotions flowed more similarly to a flood. It was a trickle through a seam in the rocks, at first. The borders of a river that grew a little coyly, taking up more space than it should have. Then the clouds coated over the sky in a grey painting, and the rain that you would never feel on your skin again came. Do you recall it now? Do you recall how after you spat, you cascaded from all sides- you gushed through canyon veins, taking every particle of sand and dust with you. You paced the room, you threw your hands up, they tore through your hair, I tried to stop you- and you flinched.

Truthfully, it might have been my fault. I have trouble understanding this trait of yours. You did not need someone to reply. You needed someone to talk at- not talk to. The river does not need a wall of rock to stop it from flooding out, it needs time. Time and space, and the warmth of the sun beating down onto it until the borders recede and the trickle folds back in.

That was the last of your tears. Yes, yes, I see it clearly now. You were huddled, encased by the soft-feathered body of a newborn bird, afraid to see the shell crack open, afraid to see the sky loom inwards, afraid to realize where your wings must take you. You were quiet then. And then you talked.

Funny words came out of your mouth. You were singing something. And then it was poems. Many poems. Snippets of conversation you had heard over your life. I liked the birdcalls you mimicked most of all. You told me about enchiladas and lemonade, how you put chips in your sandwich to give it more crunch. There was a smile on your face for the first time when you talked about your grandfather's house, and the grave you dug with your bare hands underneath the oak tree. You whispered about the skeleton cats, skinny and ragged, that you used to feed out on the smoky streets. You spoke of the flowers your sister could never grow properly, and the year you tried to learn the piano, or the time you failed a test and cried all night long about it. I don't know why, but I reached out an arm at this part and I circled it around your shoulders. You fell silent, and the next part was about your parents.

I have met many. But none told me these stories. None of them wasted any time on getting back on the path.

You stayed. You talked to me about the splinter you got in your thumb your first day at sleepaway camp- how the lake was always warm and leaving your friends was always bittersweet. You mentioned the fire that had burned the house in California down, and the hurricane that had ravaged the apartment in Austin. You told me how young you were, how scared, how loving and how brave. You told me about the boy that you never got to

get close to. You told me about the book you never got to write. You told me about the bed you'll never sleep in again, you told me about the faces you'll never touch, you told me about the foods you'll never taste, you told me about the woods you'll never get lost in, you told me about all the stupid things you'll never get to fail at, all the glorious things you'll never get to cheer about, all the people on the side of the road you could've stopped for if you hadn't kept driving, all the way off the cliff, the plummet in your stomach and the feel of self made death on the tip of your tongue- you told me again and again and again.

When you were done, you laid your head against my shoulder, and you asked the question again.

"Let me go back."

For a little seedling that will never grow, a little child that jumped off the ledge because there was nowhere else to go- you certainly believed there was more space to take up.'

[End testimony.]

(The courtroom is silent, and some garbled speech from the judges resonates through the air. The witness is crying. They had been crying since they woke up in the morgue a month ago. God, we can only presume, according to our limited accounts, seeing as everyone involved in these proceedings are now either lost to history or dead in the floorboards, speaks again at this moment.)

"And yes- yes, thank you- I'm aware this is my own trial. I'm aware I should not have sent that one back. I'm aware you cannot go backwards without a path. But-Your Honors- do we not create and destroy for a living- for a death? Do we not fashion nothing out of everything and everything out of nothing? Do we not take a star and siphon it into a soul? We are in the business of making, whether that be a void or a world. This one did the impossible. This one made their own path. They ripped the cobblestones out of the ground and laid them in the opposite direction. Where they jumped off the cliff, they climbed right back up."

(The muffled noises we hear at this point is God trying to move to the stand- it is immediately restrained. The human on the witness stand cries out. The recording cuts out for a bit, as we can tell from the static, before coming back on.)

There is always a way home- always a way to change it, always a way to set it right back to the beginning-

(Calamity ensues. God breaks free. Recording ends.)

(And somewhere, in the kernel of a starry seed, laced with the memory of a home named the universe, something begins.)

Student Name: Nicole Young  
Grade: 12  
School: Awty International School  
Title: there is a land  
Category: Poetry  
Key: Silver Key  
Educator:

there is a land  
on a lake  
in a small town  
in which everything is supposed to be perfect  
where everyone wears the same clothes and does the same activities  
secluded from a not-so-perfect world

there is a land  
surrounded by two oceans  
in a small world  
in which everything is far from perfect  
where some wear thousand dollar leather shoes  
and some can only afford discount outlet sneakers  
where some pay one hundred dollars an hour for college-prep consulting  
and some can barely afford testing fees  
in a not-so-perfect world

there is a land  
surrounded by other countries  
in a small world  
in which everything is far from perfect

where some constantly indulge in michelin star meals  
and some worry about when their next meal will be  
where some buy bottled rainwater to drink  
and some can't find clean water to drink  
in a not-so-perfect world

there is a land  
surrounded by land on one side and a salty sea on the other  
in a small world  
in which everything is far from perfect  
where some can't raise their own flag in fear of persecution  
and some can display it proudly and freely  
where some can practice their religion safely  
and some cannot pray without the fear of being attacked  
in a not-so-perfect world

there is a land  
surrounded by countries and a sea  
in a small world  
in which everything is far from perfect  
where some can't use their voice  
and some use their voice to silence others  
where some are attacked or persecuted for just spreading the truth  
and some cover-up the corrupt political and economic systems we live in hiding the truth  
in a not-so-perfect world

but here we are  
on a land

on a lake

in a small town

in which everything is supposed to be perfect

where everyone wears the same clothes

and wears different shoes and reads different books and eats different foods and speaks  
different languages

in a not-so-perfect world

Student Name: Sophia Braun

Grade: 9

School: Awty International School

Title: things i thought about drugs/ things i know about you

Category: Poetry

Key: Silver Key

Educator:

things i thought about drugs

- i always thought drugs were things you put into your body

something so masterfully dangerous that killing you from the inside out only made you want it more

- i always thought drugs were things sold in little plastic bags

something so easily powdered or pillled that all the effort went into choosing a price

- i always thought drugs were things people chose when they couldn't find another way out

something so good at taking you out of the hole that you've dug for yourself

- i always thought drugs were things that were dangerous

something so two-faced it could be the cause of pain or it's only cure

things i know about you

i didn't need to touch you to go and get addicted

- i know now that for every word you gave me i needed 3 more

- i know now for every minute i didn't spend talking to you, i was dying inside

i didn't need to have you in my pocket to feel you

- i know now that i couldn't put all my love for you in a little brown paper bag

- i know now that the hard part wasn't getting you, but paying the price for keeping you

i didn't need to meet you to know i needed you

- i know now that the butterflies before you were only fossils to be buried

- i know now that you wanted me as much as i needed you

i didn't need to use drugs to know you are one

- i know now that my pain solely came in your absence

- i know now that my heart only felt whole while talking to you

Student Name: Lindsey He  
Grade: 8  
School: Awty International School  
Title: Three; Two  
Category: Flash Fiction  
Key: Silver Key  
Educator: Jacob Moore

There are three men in a bar.

One of them is lonely. Sitting in a booth in the corner, hunched over and staring off into the peeling wallpaper. Kept company by his fleeting memories. He is silent, invisible. His tears drip off his cheeks and onto the scuffed hardwood floor below. His memories will never be shared.

Later, after tripping through litter in alleyways, he will pass out the moment he arrives home. The next day at work, he will cheerfully recommend television dinners to passing customers. He tips his hat to everyone on the street. Then he will arrive at his regular haunt, down a few shots until drunk, then stumble home.

For the other two, they are alone together. Their bodies pressed close. Neither pay attention to the inebriate in the corner. Instead, they stare into each other's eyes. They can only pretend to know anything about each other. Anything to prolong the moment. This is the first time this has happened. And the last it ever will.

The shorter of the two is being pinned up against the wall, hands up. Body shaking, eyes glancing constantly around the room. He is afraid. He imagines death. He glances out the sole window into the darkened street outside and considers running, but he looks back at the unrelenting eyes of the other man, and all thoughts of escape leave his mind. He struggles to breathe.

The other man has dark, wild eyes. They fixate on the shorter man, resolute, yet a part of him wishes he would just leave. They both stay. He has made his choice, and there is no backing out now. He is afraid. He imagines life after this. Tears build in his eyes. He blinks them away.

His breathing grows erratic, and they are twice faster than the shorter man's. His fingers twitch, inch down and—

nothing.

He gasps, really crying now. The man against the wall has closed his eyes.

I don't deserve this, both of them think, I am a good man.

I have a life, prays one.

An honest man, begs the other.

Please, God, will you end my misery tonight? plead both of them in tandem.

None will receive their wish.

Both had arrived at the bar needing something. The short man fled from his persistent misery; he drank to feel dead. The other never stopped pursuing a fleeting high; he drank to feel alive.

A single clumsy step, a spilled glass, a stray remark. Like the first sip of the night, the ending had already been determined.

Now one is pointing a gun at the other. And both are wondering, why did I do this?

Should I shoot him?

Am I ready to die?

I don't know.

They are both shaking now. And crying. And looking at each other with understanding. It is too late. Their breathing is matched: one, two, three. One, two, three.

One, two—

nothing.

After the deafening shot, silence wraps around the men like a blanket. His ears are ringing. He stumbles backwards. He slumps and slides down the wall, hitting the ground with a wet sound. He trips over himself and falls. All he can do is stare at the red seeping into the floorboards.

He is dead. He is alive. None have received their wish.

The inebriate in the corner is howling. He'll forget about it come morning light. The body will be buried, blood scrubbed. When he arrives the next day, nothing will have changed in the bar. There are no witnesses.

There are three men in a bar. Only two make it out.

Student Name: Chelsea Obua

Grade: 11

School: Awty International School

Title: To what extent was the bakumatsu of Japan caused by the West?

Category: Critical Essay

Key: Silver Key

Educator: Jeffrey Page

The bakumatsu (1853-1867), otherwise known as the end of the shogunate, was the collapse of the Tokugawa system (1603-1853) that ruled Japan. The Tokugawa Shogunate was headed by an emperor, a largely symbolic person, and a shogun, who led the military and held all the real power in the country. One common theme in the historical papers covering the bakumatsu is that Western influences politically pressured the shogunate to reopen Japan to trade, ultimately causing the system to fail. However, it is more likely that the bakumatsu was caused by inherent flaws within the Tokugawa system. The Japanese government was initially able to handle Western pressure in the 1580s by enacting a policy of exclusion, or sakoku, which isolated the country from much international trade and dealings. However, when the West tried to access Japan in the 1800s, Japan was in disarray due to famine, economic hardship, and peasant revolts. Moreover, the daimyo, or government officials, could not present a united front against the West. As a result, the Tokugawa system crumbled. Ultimately, the Tokugawa Shogunate collapsed because of government and social instability, rather than Western influence - which only acted as a catalyst. This paper explores the inherent flaws of the Tokugawa system, Western influence on Japan, and how these factors triggered the collapse of the shogunate.

The Tokugawa had homegrown flaws that ultimately contributed to many issues in the 1800s. The system was established in 1603 by Tokugawa Ieyasu. It stayed in place for almost two centuries and originally provided Japan with peace and prosperity. The shogun was the political head of the government, with the daimyo, or vassal, supporting him. The emperor was considered a god, but was essentially a figurehead in the government. The Shogun retained power by requiring the daimyo's presence at the Shogun's residence at Edo Castle. While the daimyo did not pay taxes, they had to provide for the shogun's military and construction expenses. The Tokugawa kept control over the major daimyo families through marriage by 1633. I believe that these policies were established to closely manage the daimyo. Without these guidelines, it is debatable whether the shogun would have had as much sway in the country. Moreover, being forced to pay taxes and into marriage built resentment within the daimyo over time. Additionally, the rigid and hierarchical class system raised tensions among the populace.

The four other social classes were the warrior-administrator, the peasant, the artisan, and the merchant. There was a large difference between the “ruled” and the “rulers”; as peasants, artisans, and merchants lived in abject poverty. Moreover, different classes had specific clothes, ceremonies, and behaviors and were punished for not following the set of rules. The system heavily favored the samurai class, who could even kill commoners who offended them, with no retribution from the law. Through this system, samurai increased their power and many became government officials. I argue that the poor distribution of wealth and the fact that the samurai were above the law and could kill peasants without consequences, contributed to the eventual collapse of the Tokugawa system. The rising class tensions (also from the rigid rules people needed to follow) would ultimately lead to famine and widespread peasant revolts. The flaws in the system prevented Japan from being able to properly deal with Western pressures.

Due to the instability of the Tokugawa government, the shogunate was unable to properly handle Western demands of openness with the world. In the 1500s, the Spanish and Portuguese arrived with Christian missionaries, and created ties with the island. In the 1580s however, Hideyoshi (the military leader at the time) thought that European missionaries were a precursor to invasion. This suspicion remained in the country for centuries, eventually leading Shogun Ieyasu to create the sakoku, or isolationism policy, to fulfill his duty to ward off foreign threats to Japan. The policy banned most foreign trade, and prohibited citizens from leaving Japan. After two centuries of isolation, the West started to make greater attempts to open the country. In the mid-19th century, Russia, Great Britain, and most significantly the United States, tried to open Japanese ports. By this time, the country was weaker than in the 16th century because of peasant revolts and famine. During the second quarter of the 19th century, there were even coastal incidents with Western ships. One of these incidents prompted American Commodore Matthew Perry to bring his fleet to Japan. While there, he demanded that the Japanese begin to establish trade relations with the US, and threatened to come back the following spring if they rejected. The shogun subsequently asked the Shogunal Court for advice. The court had been in disarray for years as Daimyo Abe Masahiro proposed ending the exclusion policy years earlier. The idea failed to receive a national consensus from the other daimyo. I argue that the daimyo’s inability to present a united front to the United States by providing the shogun with direct advice on how to answer Commodore Perry’s proposition exemplifies the flaws of the system and leads to the collapse of the sakoku policy. In the 1800s, the daimyo’s actions had been largely controlled by the shogun to maintain power over them. By limiting their autonomy, the daimyo likely began to resent the shogun. These negative emotions plausibly prevented the daimyo from agreeing on issues. Divisions within the daimyo court may have stemmed from officials trying to curb the favor of the shogun while some may have disliked him for his excessive power. When Perry returned a year later, the treaty was signed by Ii Naosuke, a great elder. Naosuke refused to see the emperor and received violent criticism, which eventually may have gotten him killed. By signing the treaty, the exclusion policy became

history. The decay of the Tokugawa system exemplified through the incoordination of the daimyo, allowed Commodore Perry to break a system that had been in place for hundreds of years. The decay of the isolation policy opened the country. This major change in the country's policy brought deep-rooted issues with the Tokugawa system to light.

Even though Western influence shook the country, the shogunate really collapsed due to political vulnerability. The social issues reached a critical point as the southwestern domains of Satsuma and Choshu criticized the shogun for being "weak" and started anti-foreigner campaigns. This resulted in several instances of murder and open warfare against foreigners. Citizens, long oppressed by rigid class rules, began to openly voice their opinions about the shogunate. Within the government, the daimyo system began to fall apart when the elder daimyo seat was left vacant after Ii Naosuke's death. As such, the Choshu and the Satsuma domain, which was in charge of coastal defense, took over the government. Subsequently, the shogunate was briefly reinstated in 1862 because of civil wars within the Choshu and Satsuma domains. However, further political and physical conflict threatened the shogunate yet again. The shogunate ended when Tokugawa Keki gave up the title of shogun on November 9, 1867, to circumvent the southern domains. The following year, 1868, the Satsuma and other domains were able to overthrow the already vacant shogunate through a network of secret alliances, eventually beginning the Meiji Restoration and ending the Tokugawa system. As such, I contend that pressure from the Western only served to amplify the problems in a country with high class tension and an unstable government, causing the bakumatsu.

In conclusion, Western pressures only catalyzed the collapse of the shogunate. Japan was already experiencing problems with the shogun, who failed to address the famine or peasant uprisings happening at the time. After Perry's arrival and the naval bombings, the shogunate could not present a united front and fell into even further disarray. Tokugawa Keiki resigned and the southwestern domains took over the government and began the Meiji Restoration.

Student Name: Manon Esler  
Grade: 9  
School: Awty International School  
Title: Tolerance  
Category: Poetry  
Key: Silver Key  
Educator: Amanda Wood

One man sits, his hands grasping his knees  
staring at himself  
staring at his equal  
he sits and watches pensively  
who would he be if he had not gone through what he has  
they stare at each other  
They may look the same, but they are worlds apart  
unable to express or communicate  
so many thoughts, so much knowledge

Their eyes meet, confused and scared.  
But calmness prevails as they sit there,  
Unable to express their thoughts and fears  
With no common language to wipe their tears

Their emotions connect them, heart to heart  
For feelings are worth a thousand words  
But it takes more time and thought to be heard,  
As they watch each other and learn  
Their minds and hearts begin to yearn

To read the thousand of words in their eyes  
And connect through silent cries

two men sit across from each other  
their paint is chipping; they've been here for a while  
hugging their knees, keeping themselves closed off  
they may look the same, but they are so different  
people connect through language and ideas  
but also through emotion

without a Common Language  
they learn to be more attentive and open-minded  
they watch each other and learn  
feelings are worth a thousand words  
But It takes more time and thought  
to be able to read thousands of words  
all while staring at yourself in the mirror.

Student Name: Josephine Rombouts

Grade: 12

School: Awty International School

Title: Untitled

Category: Poetry

Key: Silver Key

Educator:

The shelf in my room falls for the 100th time. The crash sends books, vinyls, t-shirts, and countless other trinkets toppling down. This inconvenience happens often, but I've never really fixed it, despite knowing that the solution is to replace the shelf's broken screw. What could be repaired in a matter of hours has turned into years of placing a BandAid over a gaping wound. Once a month, as I collect the scattered fragments of my life that sit on this unstable shelf, I am reminded of a larger picture. Each item holds significance: a picture of cherished memories with friends by the beach, the well-worn books that have accompanied me on countless adventures, and my keychain souvenir from Washington D.C. I carefully place all of these items back on my shelf to once again create a perfectly organized display of my things.

For so long, these crashes served as visualizations of parts of my life crumbling. As I carefully restore order to my room, I can't help but feel the weight of yet another moment when my own life crashes as well. When my life is stable, I am a well-oiled productivity machine, so invigorated by the pleasures of staying on top of everything that stress is unable to push through the cracks in my cycle. However, every once in a while, my composed attitude slips and parts of my perfectly shelved life collapse. When this happens, I find myself unable to do more than wrestle with my thoughts. During these disturbances I have to slowly rebuild the structure of my life, making sure that each element is in its rightful place. Soon enough, I am back to the pinnacle of efficiency - on top of my assignments, my social life, and all of my hobbies.

For years I'd resent these moments because they left me feeling isolated, as though something were missing. However, during December of my sophomore year I hit rock bottom. I was no longer the girl who could handle so much at once. I found myself drowning in an overwhelming sea of isolation. As the winter cold settled in, my occasional crashes transported me into a hole I couldn't seem to climb out of. In a night of desperation, I poured all of my thoughts onto paper, organizing every event chronologically in an attempt to understand what could have caused this seemingly permanent crash.

Through this attempt at finding my missing piece, I stumbled upon a realization: I allowed my resentment to consume my strongest trait: my ability to balance so many things at

once. The next morning I made an effort to talk to my friends and slowly rebuild what had been lost in my months of isolation. That following week I caught up on my work, picked up my guitar for the first time in weeks, and started working out again. I managed to slowly piece my life together and take advantage of my future crashes.

My crashes, previously seen as flaws, have become my time to refuel and heighten my future productivity. I am now able to quickly get back on my feet after brief moments of gloom. I have turned my life's crashes into moments when I can take a break, and look back on all of the pieces of my life that motivate me. Being calm and content does not come without stress and sorrow, because emotions only exist if there's something to oppose them. What is serenity without worry to contrast it? What is a shelf without a crash to remind me of its contents?

If I replace that broken screw, my shelf would become ordinary with no meaning attached to it. Picking back up the aspects of my life that fall every once in a while may seem like a waste of my time, but I see it as a moment where I can pause, sit on my floor, and collect myself. When I do this, I can visualize every aspect of my life coming together again. When I pick up that picture frame, I remember how lucky I am to have my friends; when I grab *Perfume: The Story of a Murderer*, I am reminded of my love for reading; when I see that keychain from D.C, I remember my passion for politics. This pattern follows every object I place back on my shelf. This crash now serves as a repository of these moments instead of a visualization of the parts of my life that have fallen. Putting my shelf back up has turned into a constant reminder of the things that I love and my reasons to persevere.

Student Name: Jonas (Elle) Williams

Grade: 9

School: Awty International School

Title: Voices

Category: Flash Fiction

Key: Silver Key

Educator: Alison Kilfoyle

"Pardon me," a being says with inflections of both amusement and annoyance. I suck in a breath and slowly open my eyes. I shift my eyes a few times in an attempt to familiarize myself with the plane. It doesn't take long for me to realize I'm in the mind space, stuck in the place where the voices live once again.

"Yes?" I reply almost too shakily, doing my best to hide restlessness and terror with false confidence. I really just want to curl into a ball and hope my prayers will be heard by one deity or another.

"Ah, I see you need another reminder." A deep slightly alluring voice says as the dark plane suddenly morphs violently into the field of my childhood causing me to stumble. I know this place very well but the scene unraveling before my eyes does not take place here.

"Oh no. No. No." I try to keep myself together, but I can't help but fall apart as I begin to sprint. Though it does not occur here I still know how it plays out. I hear the gun fire ring throughout the realm and the sound of quick footsteps on the newly muddy ground. The adrenaline rushes through me and I stumble towards my gun. This time however, I'm not too panicked as to not notice the place where I once felt such deep peace become void of life and nightmarish. More guns fire and I hear familiar voices circle in my head. They're calling for me, clearly saying my name.

I rapidly contort my body with the tears of the past filling my eyes. I know these voices, I know the people who these voices belong to. The screams for help in horror ring clear in my head. All the voices of my comrades who lost their lives to the voices. Almost as if it was on cue, once I see those dear to me, they turn red. Blood red. I sprint to them, ignoring the pungent smell of blood trickling onto the grass, hoping my eyes are wrong. I grab them, almost as if to steal them away from the cold tender embrace of death.

Immediately after I touch their beautiful blood stain porcelain skin, their eyes become lifeless, draining the rest of the blood from their bodies that remain a hideous deep red. I try to run away, to get away from these horrible thoughts but I begin to convulse. Blood spills from every pore of my own body and onto the now dead misty grass. I feel as though each piece of my body is being cut by an invisible string. I fall into black water in thousands of small bloody pieces, washed away by the sea of the cries of people I failed.

I wake with a start in a cold sweat. Crying, tears streaming down my disheveled face. My breath gets heavier as the terror sets in. I try to get up but it's a failed attempt and I crumble onto the floor, my heart racing, lungs tightening, and the tears still falling.

I stumble through my flat, eyes blurry, looking for my new schedule. I need to calm down and find reasonable-looking clothes. I need to take a shower and maybe play some music. I can't keep missing things I've been looking forward to because I'm too weak to handle a bad dream. I make it to my restroom and finally take a look at myself. The dark circles around my eyes are getting darker and it feels as if I can physically see the weight I've been carrying around since childhood. Maybe hallucinations are setting in again from the weeks of lost sleep. I could practically break down and melt just like in those horrible dreams I always have. This time, however, I'm successful in covering my flaws with makeup and vogue perfect confidence. I swallow my anxiety and walk to what I hope to be my new therapist's office. On the way the sounds of construction fill my ears egging on another episode and the urge to throw up.

"Ugh, you really won't give up will you?" The voices return with a taunting tone. Like clockwork my stomach begins to tighten and I nearly topple over.

"Wow, you've really been practicing that model walk, huh.. Give it up will you? No one with a beating heart has your back, so just quit trying to salvage something that's not here." They continue to talk over each other in the most haunting sing-songy tones.

"I agree, why not, I don't know... join them?" As the voices become more virulent, I close my eyes, fighting to push the foolish thoughts to the back of my head, stand up as straight as I can, take a deep breath, and think about all the beautiful sounds I hear. I open my eyes and count the things I can see. My senses regain stability in time to properly cross the street.

The voices chatter has gotten quieter as I try my best to extinguish them, but they always remain. They've finally given up on talking at me so they exchange venomous words with each other. I know, from experience, this day will probably get much worse.

Student Name: Sophia Braun  
Grade: 9  
School: Awty International School  
Title: Welcome to my mind puzzle  
Category: Poetry  
Key: Silver Key  
Educator: laurence paul

who

am

i?

i'm the empty gaping hole that grows on a broken heart

i'm the mask of a superhero: worn so as to conceal what lies below

i'm the ever-flipping switch between nightmare and misery but, i choose to be oblivion

i'm who asphyxiates want from you, want to be around, want to be found, want to be

do you know who i am yet?

i'm Depression.

who

am

i?

hello!, hi! my name is-

ok got it! let me just quickly try again.

who

am

i?

i am short and sweet and to the point.

i am who stands on the second hand of a clock, keeping it from moving

i am that nagging feeling to end that long talk with your parents about what you're doing wrong and goback todoingwhat iwasdoingbefor-

i can't wait anymore i'm Impatient.

who

am

i?

i am Anxiety.

see look how easy that was no need to waste precious time trying to guess who i am and cause all that unnecessary stress. but i still have to diagnose myself.

i am the nerve impulse sending a knee ricocheting up and down faster and faster

i am the not-so-little bags under eyes from a plate of self-forced extra studying with a side of lack of sleep

i am lungs, manually wrenched apart to make space for the air clawing its way into everywhere it can't be

i am the hope for ABCD choices and worry that i am thinking out loud.

see as i said before, hi i am Anxiety and that was absolutely terrifying.

who

am

i?

i am a once loved now loved-looking teddy bear sitting in a garage sale of the little girl i thought would hold me the closest

i am a rusty, broken-down bridge on the edge of a bike path given no praise for the battle scar i gave a frightened child

i am a single eardrum screaming at the top of my lungs in the hopes that music plays louder nursing my gaping hole

i am a flashlight held in the mouth of a teenage girl, giving light to a world in which i only wish i could escape to with her

i am the new kid who joined a school of kids who have lived a shout out the window away from each other their whole lives

i am the gut-wrenching feeling of catching a scent that reminds me of a home i'll never recognize again

i am the hands of a clock moving in sync with the distorted time of Wonderland

i am the owl that hoots in the dead of night hoping someone like me discovers my desperate calls

i am the cold finally sinking in after years of armor fracture, granting access to open arms that were never out-stretched for me

i am the aftermath of a right person wrong time relationship, one which had the whole world rooting for them

what's up? i am Lonely and it's nice to finally not be behind the wheel alone.

who

am

i?

i am the sudden terror that takes over when the ring, that lives on the middle right finger, is not there while reaching down for the comfort of fixating on it

i am the welcomed feeling of disappointment when never placed in anyone's top 5

i am the one who sits and listens and endures but, never experiences the freedom like that of a paper-winged butterfly in the breeze

i am a new me but constant beating on breaks the glue i thought was strong enough, striping me of the new person i had worked so hard to be

hi i'm Habit and nothing around here is ever new or exciting to me

Who

am

I?

I am the extra wrinkles that show up around the eyes of a lover talking about their partner

I am the thoughtful gift no one asked for but was given to make the person smile

I am the little gesture of a kiss on the forehead and a meaningful squeeze at the end of a hug

I am who survives at the end of an argument between parent and child

I am the hope that allows a dandelion to grow in the crack of a sidewalk

I am the spark in a stomach that was brought upon by the excited flutter of butterfly wings

I am fragile and hard to find pure but find me raw, you never let go

From one constant fighter to another, your dearest, Love

who

am

i?

i am the house of stability built on the ever-quaking foundation of trust

i am double-sided, lifting the weight of burden from one shoulder to another

i am insanity hiding in the pages of a Book of Life

i am the internal war eating from the inside out forcing smiles and laughter

i am who controls the predator and the prey of decisions, desires, and demons

i am not only the villain, i act on forgotten hope, sudden desperation, and lost love so that makes me the hero right?

i am the shared understanding between two people who created new pure trust with their words

i am relief, sweet relief coursing through the veins of those with a little less weight on their conscience

i am, and you can't tell anyone, Secret and it's only you and me who know so let's keep it this way

Who

am

I?

I am bruises on ribs and backs from hugs given a little too tightly, from falling off beds with eyes clouded with tears of laughter

I am fingers intertwined, yours than mine, like our once upon a time and never-ending happy ever after

I am code names given in the dead of night, Rapunzel, A.C. Unit, M.I.B, My Cameraman, but then again only you know their faces

I am who jump-starts a bad day, pushes over the mediocre, and makes the good ones go by all too quickly

I am who allows nerves to be struck without starting a fire and burning the house down

I am way more priceless than the cheap jewels we wear to feel rich and the rich jewels we view to feel poor

I am the give and shrinkage that allows my shorts to stay on your waist and my waist to actually fit in your dress

I am unapologetic binding, appreciative constructive criticism, and friendly bullying

I am the text that we both know could range from "my first kiss" to "please pay my bail money"

I am someone no one should be able to summarize easily, or at all

Hey adopted sibling, oldest family member ... I'm Friendship

who

am

i?

i am a bouquet of forget-me-nots, a stamp without ink, an iron branding with no heat

i am vision blurred with the haze of my fatigue and eyelids begging for closure

i am flickering sparks of energy used to plaster on gold paint to a cracked china simile.

i am the magician's rabbit, here one second, gone the next

i am rage, blinding rage rallying the tears to fight back against discomfort

i am pain, so agonizing and heart-wrenching it's impossible to keep inside, it begins to seep out

i, i am fading...

Student Name: Melinda Yao  
Grade: 10  
School: Awty International School  
Title: Westerlies Regardless of Snow  
Category: Poetry  
Key: Silver Key  
Educator:

She unfurls her wings  
Poised in stone for inky flight  
On midnight tarmac

A head is raised up  
Amber eyes dart left and right  
West winds start their blow

Teardrop icicles  
Fatten like winter melons  
In the dusty night

One bead takes its place  
Splattered on blurry pebbles  
Her wings start to flap

The moon's luminance  
Pauses for a passing ghost  
She continues on

Student Name: Hannah Song  
Grade: 11  
School: Awty International School  
Title: Zheng dan  
Category: Personal Essay & Memoir  
Key: Silver Key  
Educator:

Ever since I was five, I would come downstairs every morning and immediately whiff in a beautiful aroma of toasted sesame seeds, salted shrimp, soy sauce, and green onions– all topped onto a bowl of 蒸蛋 (zhēng dàn). Steamed eggs. Two exactly. Mixed with one cup of water for the best ratio. My mother makes it really light and silky, just the way I like it. What makes me love it, though, is that some days, the yellow surface of the eggs would be so smooth that I could see the reflection of my brown, almond-shaped eyes goggling back at me.

City to city. School to school. I spent ages two to thirteen moving across three different cities in China and attending five different international schools. Although my surroundings changed like the seasons, blowing on hot, steaming 蒸蛋 always remained one of my morning idiosyncrasies. My feelings for this accustomed breakfast dish became parallel to my feelings for my wonted, transient upbringing. I never minded the stressful moving days, the tearful “good-byes,” nor the stomach butterflies when introducing myself to new classmates. I was bubbly and friendly and would never fail at asking a random group of kids to join their game of “tag.” It never occurred to me how, at the time, just like how I comfortably indulged in the yellowness and silkiness of my mother’s 蒸蛋, I naturally interconnected better with those the same “yellow” tone as I was.

Nonetheless, my familiar environments and quotidian habits eventually took an anarchic shift when COVID-19 hit in early 2020. I still remember the morning I wriggled and stretched in my cozy bed, excited at the prospect of smelling the tangy egg scent when I went downstairs; however, what I was greeted with at the dining table was a bowl of milk and Honey Nut Cheerios. From my peripheral vision, I spotted my mother rummaging frantically through cupboards. When she saw me gawking at her with lots of concern, she announced, “Sweetie, I know this is very sudden, but please go pack. We’re flying back to the States tomorrow.” My parents were worried about China’s eventual lockdown due to the pandemic, and so, with less than twenty-four-hour notice, I flew across the world with only two weeks worth of clothes packed.

I was born in Houston, Texas; however, the longest I’ve interacted with the city was during my summer break every other year or so. Thus, when I was enrolled in my district’s public

middle school within a month of flying back in the middle of February, my experiences of transferring schools felt unprecedented. As I set foot into a dilapidated, rustic, red-brick building with sprawling floors that emitted dreariness, I felt a Globus sensation and the heebie-jeebies crawling underneath my skin. The environment dynamic now was not just “yellow;” it consisted a lot more of “white” but also “black,” “brown,” and even “olive.”

“Hi, my name is Hannah, and I moved here from Chin—”

“Yo look, another Chinese NERD added to our class.” My self-introduction was interrupted by snickers and whispers. This would be the first racist comment I heard to eventually set the trend for others to bandwagon upon. The schools in China had provided me comfort and merriness, whereas the school here only delivered torment. In attempts to reduce the malicious remarks from others and assuage my discomfort at school, I began hesitating to raise my hand in class even when I knew the correct answer, limiting myself to only sitting with one group of people at lunch, and secretly picking up and using the slang and trends I heard the popular kids always talk about. At home, rice began to taste bitter, and I threw more frequent fits at my mother for not understanding “easy” English or Western culture. She didn’t understand why American Eagle and Brandy Melville had to be the brands I wore. She didn’t understand why I felt the need to heavy-contour, highlight, and “glam” up my face. She didn’t understand why I suddenly became interested in basketball and American football games. She didn’t understand why my regular 蒸蛋 in the mornings was permanently replaced by Honey Nut Cheerios. Kind of small. No longer rich-yellow, but lightly golden and surrounded by white.

People often say, “You are what you eat,” and I took this literally. I drank milk for breakfast, lunch, and dinner—hoping to drown in the color. Hoping that if I sunk down my head, my status and image could seep through the cracks of my fibers and appear better. Less Chinese. I told myself I’d be happier. But I choked on this milk. My character smothered. My soul and spirit dwindled like expired old Cheerios; I came out more frail than before. I realized too late that I had become just a frangible shell with nothing left to fill. No more toasted sesame seeds, salted shrimp, soy sauce, and green onions—only what everyone disliked: soggy cereal.

However, as two years went by of me putting up a facade that bleached my own heritage and dubbed my own language annoying, I got weary. I knew it didn’t have to be like this forever. Although it was difficult, at the beginning of tenth grade, I gradually allowed my Chinese-American identity to coexist with Western cultural practices. It started small, such as choosing to speak at a normal volume when I called my parents in Mandarin, but soon, I found myself recommending my Caucasian friends eat Chinese food when we hung out and showing off the clothes my relatives mailed to me from China at school. I began embracing my brown eyes and incomplete eyelid crease again and also cut myself bangs. My rediscovery journey to untethering my flower child incarnate— a little girl who excitedly puffed on and tried to find her reflection on the smooth 蒸蛋 surface— has taken some time to evolve, but I’m proud of the progress nonetheless.

“蒸蛋可以吃了！” Oh. Be right back. My mother is calling to say that my steamed egg is ready to eat!

Student Name: Olivia Kocian  
Grade: 8  
School: Calvary Episcopal School  
Title: The Scent of Life  
Category: Science Fiction & Fantasy  
Key: Silver Key  
Educator: Crystal Brock

I'm running, my body heavy on my feet. My suffocating breath is scattered as I trudge continuously. The scent of blood, my blood, floods my nostrils. That one scent I never wish to smell, but it seems to be the scent I can't rid myself of. I lean against a tree on the outskirts of the forest.

My gaze rises up to the sky. One constellation after another outlines itself in my head. They glow bright in the endless void of space. Noel loved the stars. Why did he force me to go? Why did I leave him?

"If at least one of us can survive, that's enough for me," he reassured me. But that was an hour ago. It should have been him. I should be dead.

My wounds are deep, and it pains me to just breathe. The scent of blood is dispersed around me as my thick blood drips to the earth. A wave of dizziness overtakes me, making the weight of my body crash on the soil beneath me. Black-ish purple markings like waves spread throughout my body. They radiate a dark, black glow as I look forward to nothing. I couldn't see anything, not clearly at least. My mind flashes back to my final moments with Noel.

"Live."

That was the last word he said to me, then they took him. They hurt him. They killed Noel.

The stars glitter and light up a beaten path, but no matter my efforts, my body refuses to move. I look upon the sky and see Cygnus. That was Noel's favorite constellation of them all. It's ironic. Cygnus was said to be the gateway to the afterlife. Souls were thought to pass through the constellation while venturing to the other side. I wonder if Noel passed through. I know if he did, he would be ecstatic.

I hold onto the necklace he made me. I don't have a clue as to where he got the materials to make it, but he made a necklace charm that was half fluorite and half moonstone. It was shaped to be a small pointed dagger. Noel said it was a protection charm. Since that

day, I've never taken it off. It cuts into my hand as I hold it. The small charm was very sharp. It could be used as an actual dagger if it came down to it.

As I stare into the void above me, my vision blurs and I feel the presence of a stranger approach me. I move slightly, wincing in pain, to try and see the person. Before I can even get a glance, I hear muffled words and my vision blackens.

"Halo, Halo! Wake up!" Noel whisper-yelled at me. He nudged me in my bed, waking me up. I glared at him while pulling the blanket over my head.

"What?" I replied groggily. Then it hit me. It was one a.m. Time to escape this hell hole. Noel pulled the blanket from my head and saw the realization in my blood red eyes. I nodded at him and left the comfort of my blanket. We had a silent exchange of looks and glances. It looked like randomness, but we knew exactly what the other was saying.

We walked the hallways of the laboratory. Left. Right. Right. Passed the door down the left, Dr. Brevity's office. That was where the keycard was, our ticket out of hell. Noel looked at me, and I nodded in response to say I was ready.

I was abnormally short for a male, but this meant that vents were easy access to me. Noel held out his hands to support my foot. I stepped up and we bounced in preparation. One... two... three! I jumped up as Noel lifted me, grabbing onto the air grille. This forced it to open up from one side. We had loosened the screws the previous night. I climbed up into the vent and re-closed the air grille. The vent was dark and cold, but I crawled a few feet west and kicked open the air grille that led to Dr. Brevity's work room. There was an empty space on her desk that I jumped down to. Although, if I'm being honest, it was more like falling quietly onto her desk.

I grabbed the keycard and unlocked the door from the inside. The moment I walked out, Noel pushed me back in. I don't know how, but he had locked the door from the outside. There was a small window in the door. I stepped up on my tip-toes and looked out of it with a face of horror.

"NOEL!" I shot up, panting from my dream. Before I could do anything, I groaned in pain from my sudden actions. My eyes wander down to see my shirt was off and bandages wrap tightly around my abdomen. My eyes dash from left to right, up to down, trying to

decipher where I am. I'm laying in a bed, a very comfy one at that. The scent of my blood was minimal now, covered by the scent of freshly made food. It could still be on the stove with how overwhelming the scent was. Pancakes I think, with bacon as well.

As I finally started to calm my breathing, a stranger came into the room. He had the same presence as the stranger from the forest. I stare at him with my blood red eyes nervously. What does he want from me? Why did he help me? Is he going to take me back? Question after question flooded my mind endlessly, until his voice broke the silence.

"You gonna eat or just stare at me till the days out?" The stranger inquired. I didn't realize it, but he placed a tray of food on the nightstand beside the bed. It was pancakes and bacon. I'm still spot on with my sense of smell it seems.

The man started to walk over to me. He picked up the tray and placed it on my lap with a hint of aggression. "Eat. You're hurt, tired, and thin as a twig. Eat the pancakes."

He stares at me, almost threateningly. There are only two stacked up on top of each other with three bacon strips on the side. I picked up the fork and started to cut up the pancakes. As I did, the stranger questioned me.

"So, mind explaining why you were in the forest, dying?" He stared at me with a stone cold face, almost as if he was trying to decipher my story. "You don't look any older than sixteen, so what gives?"

"I... I fell down a ditch, had a bunch of pointed rocks at the bottom. One of them punctured me." Lie. That's all I could say at the moment, considering my face is stuffed with pancakes. Who knew running from the damned place of your friend's death for hours could create an appetite? That's also all I planned to say. He isn't of any importance to me. He doesn't need to know. I don't want him to know. Who even knows what he'd do if he knew where I came from, or what I am. He looks at me in a way that screams the fact he doesn't believe me, but despite that fact, he doesn't question me further about it. Instead, he grabs my chin and pulls me close as if to inspect me. My eyes widen, and my reflexes kick in. I elbow his inner elbow, making his arm bend. This forces his grip on my chin to release and I back away as far as the bedpost would let me go, but not without grabbing the food.

"What was that for?! You've a bad scrape on your face! I was tryin' to get a better look at it! You want help or not?!" He questions me in a loud, demanding tone of voice. That tone only scared me more. I shrink as far back as I can. I even set aside the food so I can hug my knees and shrink further. Fear was shot in my eyes. I can't break my stare at him, the stranger. His voice soon grew to be softer as he saw my state. It was only a slight change but enough to be comforting in a way.

"Hey, kid, you good?" The strange person looks at me with a softer expression and his slightly different tone. I stare at him for a little longer before breaking eye contact and

laying on my side. I winced because of my injury, but let the warmth of the bed take me. The stranger sighed before talking to me again.

“My name’s Waylon. I’m not going to hurt you, but your wounds will get infected if you don’t let me treat them. I can and will knock you out to treat them if I have to. Don’t make me.” The stranger’s (who I guess should call Waylon now) voice was cautious and careful as he spoke to me, his menacing tone hinted here and there. I nod my head, sit up, and scoot back forward to where he could reach my face. He grabs it gentler this time, still rough, but not as threatening. He moves my face to the side as he closely inspects the scrape. I hadn’t even realized the wound was there. Guess the mind really does focus on the more agonizing pain before the more minute.

“Do you have a name, or am I just supposed to call you ‘kid’?” He questions me. Should I tell him? It wouldn’t hurt anything, would it?

“Halo. My name’s Halo.” I replied, hesitantly. As he moves my face, I move my head in the same direction so it doesn’t hurt as much. Eventually, Waylon gets up and leaves the room I sit in. I lay in wait just thinking of the previous night’s events.

“Noel, why’d you have to go and die?” I mutter under my breath, not noticing Waylon walking back into the room with a first aid kit in hand.

“You ever going to tell me who Noel is? You screamed his name when you woke up, now you’re talking about the kid’s death. So, who is he, Halo?” He inquires as he sits beside me to put antibiotics on my scraped face. I stare at him in shock for a moment, but my face soon turns somber. My blood red eyes glaze over with salty tears that hesitate to slide off my face. I hold my stomach as if I could hold onto him. Almost as if I could secure something that could bring Noel back.

“He was a friend. Practically a brother.” My voice cracked as I spoke. The presence of weakness vibrates through the room as the first of many tears rolled from my red eyes. “Why are you out in the woods? This looks to be a cabin that could very well be in the middle of nowhere. So what gives, and why help me? I would’ve been just as happy dead as I am now.” Waylon rolls his eyes at me, his expression returning to the cold, ineffable bearing.

“Look, kid. You were dying, and I had already tried to lift you up. If someone had found you after that, they would’ve traced evidence back to me, and I’ve no intentions to go to juvie anytime soon. And as to why I’m in the woods, I’m here because I hate it at home. So, found this beat up place, fixed it up a bit, and now I stay here. By the way, I hope you didn’t expect me to buy that ‘ditch with pointed rocks’ crap. So why’re you out here?” I look down as Waylon places the bandage on my face. Despite his cold, threatening demeanor, his hands are gentle when handling my wounds. Why should I trust him? Yes, he saved me, but he mainly did it so he wouldn’t be accused of murder. He stares at me and finally just sighs.

Suddenly, there was a knock at the door. I flinch when I hear the thumping of a fist hitting the door. I hold my necklace and realize my hand was wrapped in bandages as well. Waylon bears a confused expression as he turns to leave and answers the door. I do my best to stand up from the bed and follow him. My legs are weak, causing me to stumble more than what's healthy, but I manage to get to the doorway of the room I was in and peek at the front door. I couldn't see past Waylon's overgrown figure, but I heard the voices of the visitor. Those voices. Their voices. Familiar voices.

My eyes widen and I take in a sharp breath. The lungs in my chest expand and compress at an inconsistent, rapid pace. My legs weaken, and I stumble backwards as I move to the nightstand to find a hair tie, my chest still expanding and compressing with my lungs. In and out. In and out. I see my hair tie and quickly put my hair up into a small bun. My hair has been hiding my ears, so once my hair was back, my elven ears poked out. I'm still in my hyperventilating state as I start to choke on nothing, coughing up blood, and that scent comes rushing back. That horrid scent. I wipe the blood off my hand and onto my pants. Footsteps. Their presence grows as the visitors enter the house. I can feel them coming and searching. Stamp, stomp, thump, stomp. Step after step, their presence grows closer.

My sweat glands start dispersing sweat as I stress out. I painfully and hastily make my way to a closet that is in the room. The door opens for me, and I fall into the closet. I don't know how I got the door opened in the first place, let alone how it closed. The inside was dark, and it was slightly damp in the closet. I lean against the wall as my throat tries to stifle my pained groans from falling. Voices can be heard from beyond the door. A singular door. That's all that separates me from them.

Student Name: Valentina Gunn  
Grade: 9  
School: Duchesne Academy Of Sacred Heart  
Title: An Insight Into a Soul  
Category: Personal Essay & Memoir  
Key: Silver Key  
Educator: Lesli Dabney

The eyes are the window to the soul.

Anyone could ponder on this saying eternally, yet there is no other way to explain the vulnerability and emotional exchange that exists when gazing into the depths of another's. "The eyes are the window to the soul" is the closest humans have come to describing optical beauty in a verbal way, but when one takes the time to reflect on the words the saying contains, it is clear that the sentence itself is quite puzzling. What is the soul truly? How can the eyes be the "window to the soul" if we cannot seem to establish a definition for the soul itself?

The interest sparked in fourth grade.

The hunger to learn more. The eagerness and love of the beautiful harmony that exists within the human eye. As I listened to Mrs. Held pull apart the components of the eye in a fascinating model, I gaped at the wonders that lurked beyond the eye's glossy white surface. Coming home from school that same day, I eagerly shared these discoveries with my parents, who were clearly shocked at my own gleaming eyes as I spoke animatedly about curious things such as the retina and pupil. The interest dwelled in my heart throughout the years and far into middle school.

Speaking to my sixth-grade class about my science fair project, the fear I usually had when sharing with an audience instantly dissipated. For that particular project, I experimented on the

dilation and constriction of the pupil with a model I had built several weeks prior to my presentation. As I shared my fascination with the audience, I could tell that my excitement was growing with every word I spoke. My intense and heated passion for the human eye and its wonders radiated into the auditorium. From that moment, I knew that ophthalmology, or the study of eyes, wasn't simply a topic that interested me. Ophthalmology was me. It's difficult to explain, but there is such complex beauty lurking beyond the eye's surface that I connected with immediately. Something I heard, something I saw, or something I felt when studying the eye must have resonated with me, and possibly, my soul. How can we see all that we see? How can the vast spectrum of colors have such unimaginable impacts on our lives? How can these unfathomable optical wonders possibly exist?

In many ways, I'd like to think that the qualities that shape my life resemble the characteristics of the human eye.

The role of the cornea is to be a transparent barrier that protects the iris, pupil, and the rest of the eye's most essential components. The eye's cornea is similar to my life's shield against vulnerability. A window from which I can cautiously watch the world, trusting that I am free from harm behind my crystal-clear dome. The depth of my emotions behind my life's shield is only available to a trustworthy select few who have shown interest in being authentic friends. In my eyes, vulnerability is a weakness that can easily be taken advantage of, and therefore, should be reserved for those who have proven to be loyal.

I despise opening up to people. I really do. I don't believe I have been part of a single relationship where I've fully pushed away my mental barriers and shields. Disappointment is one of the greatest villains within my life, and when contemplating what has caused me the

most distress in the past, the answer is simply people. People always seem to find a way to let me down. People laugh at me. People ignore me. People glare at me. People run away. People push me down to the point where my limbs are too weak to rise again. After much time attempting to determine a solid statement that expresses my anger in a single sentence, I have come to a conclusion. The unfortunate truth is that it's me against the world. Against everyone. In other words, how can I ever place my trust in a human's deceiving, villainous eyes? This is why a shield is necessary to guard my soul.

I despise the propensity of people to stereotype. The iris, or the colored optical muscle responsible for the dilation and constriction of the pupil, represents the negative, biased assumptions of others. The iris blemishes perception. Due to our focus on superficiality, we fail to search for the soul that dwells beneath our assumptions. Our opinions are directed towards a person's "iris," and we end up characterizing them by what is immediately visible. Just as there is much more to my eyes than simply the brown pigment of my irises, there is so much more to every story. More to every person. More to every soul.

Then again, who am I really?

What is my soul? How can I complain over the way others seem to "characterize" me when I am still searching for my own identity myself? I'm the girl who fears walking up to a group of teenagers having a good time, because I'm simply terrified of rejection, exclusion, and confusion. I'm the girl who gets easily frustrated with people who can't understand my interests and motivations. I'm the girl who overthinks every word she says, every decision she makes, and every unpredictable moment the future holds. I'm that girl. Is there more to my soul than that? There must be.

The outer layer of a human eye is visible to all, yet the depth that exists beyond is immense. Like the eye, it

is useful to examine the outer layer of myself in order to understand the perception of others. The sclera is the white of the eye. When a person is healthy, the sclera is gleaming white, in sharp contrast to the colored iris. However, when people are ill, fatigued, or malnourished, the sclera turns glossy red or even a sickly yellow at times. The white of the eye represents my purity of soul, my innocence, and my desire to remain healthy in mind and spirit. To me, balance is essential in life. Though I love a challenge and a constant struggle to succeed, I understand the importance of maintaining strong equilibrium and an ability to regulate pressure.

The aqueous is a clear liquid located between the lens and the cornea of the eye. This liquid is constantly produced and regularly drained from the eye through channels known as the trabecular meshwork as a way of removing toxins and regulating the eye's internal pressure. The aqueous represents my varying display of emotions and my ability to control stress. To those people who place overwhelming pressure on my soul, I may seem cold, reserved, or even reclusive at times. My life is constantly flooded by their snide comments, their back-handed compliments, and their groans when someone simply mentions my name.

Why do you smile so much? You're so quiet. Why don't you talk more? How are you so smart? You seem so innocent. You're too nice. You know you can say "no" sometimes, right? I can't believe you got a 92 on that test. You can do better than that. You should try more extracurriculars. You need to step out of your comfort zone. Take more risks.

That's me. Every day. To me, words have always been louder than actions, as their heavy, lingering presence never seems to let me rest. I understand that a constant build-up of pressure will always be a factor in my worries. However, it is in these moments that I look to the world around me as a source of relief. I look towards the special things

that have never failed to bring a spark of joy to my life in the darkest moments. I look to the ever-flowing trees, to the blank canvas that lies untouched in my garage, to the endless shelves in the corner of my room filled with the most captivating literature, to the vinyl records of the most touching music, and most importantly, to the people that joyfully nourish my soul.

The middle layer of the eye is known

as the uvea, which contains vessels that carry blood through the eye to nourish it. The uvea represents special aspects that bring such beauty to my life, yet often go unnoticed. It is impossible to name all of the constants and nourishing wonders that exist in my life, yet I absolutely have some honorable mentions.

Spiritually, my faith in God has never failed to bring vivid color to my life

when I become accustomed to shades of grey. Physically, my mother, father, and brother have constantly acted as sources of guidance and comfort. Together, my faith and family have allowed me to understand the uniqueness and beauty that exists within my soul. These beautiful blessings within my life never leave my side, especially when I need their love most.

When people laugh at me, God will

assure me that I was made in His image and likeness. When people push me down, my father will lift me onto my feet and embrace me. When people ignore me, my mother will place all her love in my heart. When people glare at me, my brother will watch me with kind, sparkling eyes. When people run away, I will accept the stillness left behind and find joy in the peace.

The retina is the inner layer of the

human eye, and it is particularly recognized for receiving light from an image and converting this light into electrical impulses. My life's

"retina" is my unique way to make sense of the world. I receive an

overwhelming amount of information every day. Some information inspires. An excellent grade on a test. A wonderful outcome on a project. An exciting

vacation set for the future. However, some information slips into my subconscious. This information appears in the form of jealousy. I become jealous of gorgeous clothes, perfect bodies, and magnetic personalities that I see in social media and in the people around me. Information can also appear in the form of confusion. I become confused and speechless when exposed to the darkest corners of the world, when I hear stories about the intense suffering of others, and when I see such cruelty among those around me. I seldom notice this horrid information's detrimental presence before I'm completely taken over. Taken over by jealousy. Taken over by fear. Taken over by tears. Taken over by darkness.

I have lurked in the darkness for far too long. I have cried. I have yelled. All because I'm lost. I've lost sight of myself amid this world. I can't even begin to explain what exists within my soul, because I truly have no idea. However, through the darkness and through the depths, I know that I will always keep on searching. Searching for the light.

Though I will never understand why many things happen the way they do in my life and the lives of others, I understand this. I understand that we are better than this. Why do we let such worldly thoughts cloud our minds and slowly creep into our souls? We have the ability to rise above. Therefore, it is necessary to find a way to protect our souls against the wickedness and snares of the world. We must allow our souls to reflect beauty through the windows of our eyes. Like the retina, I must personally find a way to concentrate worldly dark influences into a bright, positive outcome. After all, everything I despise, everything I love, and everything I still don't know has certainly shaped my life as I have grown and continue to grow today.

It is in this that we may recognize

that the eyes are truly the window to the soul. In gazing into the depths of another's eyes, a life will unfold, as each of the eye's components will tell its story.

A story of uncertainty. A story of loss. A story of anger. A story of love.

But most importantly, a story of hope. A story of knowing that there is more in one's soul and of searching endlessly to find it.

Student Name: Adelaide Dutt  
Grade: 11  
School: Duchesne Academy Of Sacred Heart  
Title: Consumed  
Category: Personal Essay & Memoir  
Key: Silver Key  
Educator:

We pulled out a bamboo stick that fell from the neighbor's yard into our bushes. The stick was moved to my backyard. 8 feet tall, this black bamboo stick was overwhelmed by swells of rain. The outdoor tiled floor of the backyard was slick from rain, so I walked cautiously to avoid slipping.

"Why are we doing this?" my sister Quinn questioned.

Rolling my eyes I replied, "I don't know...it's a bamboo stick? Maybe it could be decorative, or used for a craft?" My hand lightly pushed away her shoulder as I moved past her. Hustling to the kitchen, opening the screen door, I tore off a sheet of plush paper towel. Sounds of my mother's favorite show about English royalty from her room rang in my ear. I imagined her curled up on her soft carpeted floor, it was past 9pm, her famous "do not disturb me" time.

My dad looked at me, sanguine brown eyes beaming, "Addita, get inside before you catch a cold!" he said with thin lips connecting into a smile. That name used to embarrass me, "Addita," but he was the only person who called me that. The only one who could call me that. It made me feel special. I yelled in response to his trailing voice "I will only be a second." He scaled over a rusty, old ladder, trying to clean muck off of the lower roof. Going on a ladder in the rain seemed treacherous, but these impulsive decisions were typical for him. Once when a tree had to be cut in our front yard, he insisted on observing the workers and helping them pick up miscellaneous sticks and leaves. I turned away from this seemingly typical activity.

Splitting perforated paper into sheets, I handed Quinn one and we began to clean dirt off the stick. "Actually, I think I'll uh...get a rag instead." I said, dropping the stick back on the ground. Somewhere in between the rain and the dark, there was a clunk and then a crash, a yell from across the living room, "Bryan!"

Tightening my grip around the rag, I slowly slid my hand along that screen door, walking toward the clamor. My feet found their way around the garage corner, I saw the rickety ladder, limp on the ground. Next to it, a still body, my dad. My eyes met his half-shut ones, then his chest, his glasses, the blood, the ladder. His eyes, his chest, his glasses, the blood, the ladder. I tried to look away, stare at the wall, my hands, but I burned into the body that appeared in front of me, lifeless. I connected the dots from his eyes, fluttering while simultaneously staring blankly at the sky, to the staggered rising and falling of his

chest. His glasses, shattered and broken, no longer framed his stoic face, but danced around him carelessly, mocking him. Those shards were once held together in circular frames, placed over his nose, almost falling off his face when he hoisted me over his shoulders as a young girl. His body was carried under the weight of a deep, red pool of blood. It circled around him, expanding and consuming him. I tried to find the culprit, where he was bleeding, why he was bleeding, whether I was imagining this or my brain wanted to see me suffer. My feet moved before my brain did, I stumbled on my footing as I ran away, starting backwards, turning around, begging my mind to let go of what was witnessed. My only safe haven was the sound of his suffocating breaths, getting quieter with each step. I presumed that those breaths were his last, so I did anything to get out.

With my vision blurring, I ran up the steps to my room. Closed my door. Closed my eyes. Shrieking screams from my mom and innocent cries from my sister amplified as I burrowed my head into the carpeted floor. I tried to suffocate the sound, drown it out, hoping to confide in the thin floor that surrounded me. The scraggly carpet felt static against my cheeks, procuring moisture as I pushed myself further into it, hoping to find a rabbit hole to fall into. Behind the darkness of my eyelids, the pool of blood that surrounded my dad grew stronger, I imagined it swirling around him until there was nothing left of his being to take. I gripped my ribs, imagining my body collapsing into itself, the red pools felt like they were devouring me with him. Stumbling to my window, I saw the black bamboo stick on the ground outside, swelled by the surrounding water. If it stayed there long enough, the water would wash it away, or wither it down, leaving it to nothing. I imagined my dad as that bamboo stick, and the water was blood that would soon sever him away from me, forever.

Lights flashed red and blue from the front door. I practically crawled to the edge of the stairs, trying to cover my eyes but shaky hands could not shelter what was done. The rain had stopped, but I did not know whether that blood was still consuming my dad. His body weighed over a thin stretcher, and he was carried into the small confinement of an ambulance. Firefighters slammed the doors, then slapped the ambulance. The sound made me shudder.

My mom ran up the stairs, her usually cold hands- now warm and sweaty- pressed against my cheeks. I felt guilty for leaving my dad in the state that I saw him in, not warning my sister or mom when I saw him and could have done something. I could have done something. Why didn't I do anything? My mom's eyes searched for mine but I looked down. "I'm going with him, you and Quinn are going with the neighbors. I know this is hard, seeing him like this. I don't know what will happen. I think he might... he will probably be okay. Go get changed and then they will take you to their house." I hated myself for not working well under pressure like her.

That word "probably" was the only thing I processed at that moment. Probably. Probably means "I don't know." It means "I cannot give you an answer." I found my way back into my room, changed out of my wet, snot-riddled clothes and my sister and I walked to the

neighbor's house. The blonde, suburban mom gave us my favorite: vanilla ice-cream and sprinkles. I had one spoonful.

She guided us to her living room. With her husband and their children, we gathered around their living room to play Pictionary. I was in disbelief, playing Pictionary when I did not know whether I just saw my dad's last breaths or not. My sister's hand felt smaller, frozen in mine as I checked my phone. No notifications. The only image that circled my mind during that game was one of a bamboo stick being consumed by water. I blinked and I again saw the image of my dad suffocated by blood. I released a tight grip from my arm, pale marks were left behind. I hated myself for cleaning dirt off a dumb stick when a few feet away my dad was on that ladder, if I came earlier I could have told him to come off, or asked him if it was a good idea to be up there in the rain. I faked a smile and held my breath. One sigh out and I would be in tears again.

That day was the last time I remember talking to those neighbors.

The memory is blurred, but my mom eventually walked to our neighbor's house to take us back home. My stomach hurt from the hard grip my arms held over it, the pain worsened as my mom got closer and closer to me. In my mind there were flashes of a disheveled body, images of a full and plump heart slowing down. My mom looked at me with solemn eyes, "He is in the hospital. He will live. Three broken ribs, a popped eye socket and cheekbone, fractured shoulder, and concussion. But he will live." Her blunt but safe words cut through to me. A sea of relief overcame me, I shivered from my back and let the electric feeling go through to my fingertips. I then felt embarrassment, and guilt for thinking he was dead. But then there was the staggered rising and falling of his chest, the spills of blood, the broken glass circling his features. How could I not think the worst? The ladder that laid what looked as lifeless as him, was beside him.

My dad stayed in the hospital for a week. Visits were not allowed, due to the covid pandemic being at its peak. I imagined how he would look when he got home, if he would be okay or not. When he came back, he was plagued with a handicapped parking slip, a slingshot holding his arm, and an unrecognizable expression. A once safe and soft face was marked with patches of blue and purple swirls, his eye puffed up to twice the normal size, his face hollow and empty. I tried to hide my petrified face under a flimsy smile. He could not move his bruised and mutilated arm. Selfishly, I thought about how he could no longer drive me to Sunday breakfasts, or dial up the radio when the Beatles station was playing our favorites.

"Does it hurt? Your arm, or anything else?" I asked, not knowing what else to say

He glanced down at his arm, then back up at me. "Just a smidge," he said sarcastically.

I wrapped one arm around him, then the other in an awkward embrace. Regardless of my thoughts, I felt the warmth in my heart start up once more. I heard his hearty laugh, one that had comforted me for so long, one that I expected to never ring out once more.

By night I went outside to catch my breath after a whirlwind of a week. I saw the enormous bamboo stick standing still, on the ground in our backyard. I had completely forgotten about it. Water never consumed it, the wood was still compacted together and nothing withered it away. I picked it up with my hands, it stood up high and straight. Placing it back up against our fence, where it originally fell from my neighbor's yard- I felt light. My mother's voice called me to come inside. As I turned around I saw my dad leaning against the doorframe uncomfortably holding his arm. "We better get in."

Student Name: Audrey Hoang  
Grade: 10  
School: Duchesne Academy Of Sacred Heart  
Title: Prove to me that the world will be beautiful  
Category: Poetry  
Key: Silver Key  
Educator:

The world is beautiful, I won't deny

Our leaders demand but don't supply  
A mindset where ends justify the means  
Your stagnant decisions are routine  
Resources don't rest like dragons  
Wake them up and make stuff happen  
Listen to the land of the freed  
Create the laws you know we need

The world is beautiful, in a wondrous way

Just look around at this lovely display  
Machines that let out fumes  
Glaciers no longer loom  
Oceans filled with trash  
Tsunamis that can kill in a flash  
Forests slowly dying  
All the ecosystems are crying

The world is beautiful, look around

There are people who care for our ground  
Making waves with a loud presence  
Recreating nature's lost iridescence  
They see the ocean trash and absent trees  
Know why the earth increases degrees  
It's a vision of a world revived in green  
A future of hope and dreams to be seen

The world is beautiful, save it soon

We cannot sing the same tune  
Keep Mother Earth strong and true  
Atonement for her harm is well due  
Make greenhouse emissions a faint memory  
So humanity can survive another century  
May the generations to come never know  
How close we are to the final blow

The world is beautiful, it's indisputable  
But it won't be for long  
I hope you can prove me wrong

Student Name: Eleanor Aalders  
Grade: 9  
School: Duchesne Academy Of Sacred Heart  
Title: Radio Silence  
Category: Flash Fiction  
Key: Silver Key  
Educator: Lesli Dabney

[ click ]

[ I was seven when death came for my father and brother. Dressed in camouflage, an AKMS gun strapped to his back, unruly black hair flattened by a rounded helmet, he looked like an average Syrian soldier, but I knew better. I saw who he really was. ]

Baba was quiet as he and Hassan packed; their silence filled our small house, drowning out the noise from the street. Baba and Hassan hugged me tight, promising they would come home soon. But one glance at Emmi, my mother, told me everything they were desperately trying to hide.

Baba and Hassan would not be coming back.

I was twelve when the war finally found us. We had been sent home early from the farm that day, the sky beginning to pink by the time I arrived back at the house. Slinging off my backpack, I made my way to the kitchen, biting into the cherry-red apple my employer handed out to each of us at the end of every workday. I paused when I heard Emmi, her voice curt and angry. Back pressed to the edge of the wall, I peeked into the kitchen, where I almost headbutted into the back

of a Syrian rebel, his clothes coated in dirt and grime. I squeaked, apple falling through my fingers, as he turned to face me. I heard Emmi gasp from behind the soldier, her feet slapping against the hardwood floor as she pushed past the soldier to stand in front of me.

"Please," she spoke softly, but determined, "take me. Not her. She is hemar. She is of no worth." Being called hemar, stupid and worthless, would've hurt, but I could hear the waver in Emmi's voice as she continued to plead. She was trying to protect me - by sacrificing herself. I tried to protest, but Emmi grabbed my wrist and held it tight, her eyes warning. I could hear shouts outside as the soldier studied Emmi before turning his scrutiny onto me. It felt like an eternity before his gaze shifted back to Emmi. My feet felt like lead, stuck to the floor as I watched him grab her roughly, shoving her to the door. I'll never forget the look on her face as she crossed the threshold of the door. Emmi had been many things during the civil war - angry, determined, sad. But never once had she been afraid.

I was still staring at the door when Ibrahim, our neighbor, came crashing through, hair plastered to his face, blood dripping from the side of his head. The gunshots were getting closer now, and the bombings were becoming more and more frequent. In that moment he seemed so much older than the eighteen-year-old he was; his eyes were haunted, his easy smile gone.

"Habibi," he said roughly, rushing to my side, "where is Khaalah?" Ibrahim tried to keep his voice steady, reassuring, but his shaking hands showed the fear he tried to keep at bay. He was looking for Emmi. But Emmi was gone. And the odds of her coming back were as likely as the war ending tomorrow. When I didn't answer, he spoke softly to himself, whispering "Allahumma inni

a'udzubika minal hammi wal hazan," and gazed around our living room, his eyes landing on three bags on the floor. I sucked in a breath. Emmi must have packed the bags before I got home, one for me, her, and Ibrahim. Screams erupted outside and Ibrahim snapped into motion, grabbing two bags, looping one around his shoulder before throwing one to me. Grabbing my hand, he pulled me out the door and into the back alley our house connected to, his gait steady and sure, as if he knew that if he hesitated for even a moment, everything would come crashing down.

[ I don't know how long we walked for, ducking for cover whenever we heard gunshots, explosions, or shouts. I only knew that Ibrahim and I had to get out of Syria. That we had to get out of here, the place where we had grown up. Where we had run, barefoot and wild, through the streets, laughing and happy and free, unaware that one day everything would change.

It only hit me then, as we crested the hill just outside of the city, my eyes tracing the plumes of smoke rising from the felled buildings, how much I had truly lost.

Baba and Hassan. Emmi. The ability to wake up and fall asleep at night without thinking, today might be my last. Eyes closed, I whispered a silent prayer.

Only Allah could help us now. ]

[ static ]

[ click ]

Student Name: Hannah Hu  
Grade: 11  
School: Emery Weiner School  
Title: Counting  
Category: Flash Fiction  
Key: Silver Key  
Educator: Ben Rawlins

I like counting things.

Mama tells me every time we flip through the sticky pages of her photo albums and memories about how the week I was born, before I could babble or stumble or lose the new baby smell of me, I would curl my fingers in slow intervals, counting. What I was taking account of, she doesn't know, her hands up in the air as she says so.

She coughs out a laugh as she wonders if I was counting the amount of years until I could tell her she didn't have to wait for her face to dry up and her hands to turn pruny to divorce my useless block of a dad.

I laugh, counting the seconds one of my last laughs here takes, and turn to Papa, who, as usual, does not get the joke. Normally, I would roll my eyes and move the conversation along, but this is my chance to do a good thing and I haven't counted me doing a good thing under this roof in a long time. I will maybe never get another chance, so I elbow the ten ton rod of meat that is his arm and ask him isn't it funny that Mama said that since they're still married and isn't it also so funny that our turkey's-

Sweetie, Mama cuts in with her bad news voice. Papa places the weight of his ten ton arm on my shoulder. I almost shake it off before I stay still and count the time it takes to steady my breathing.

I was just going to say our turkey's in such a funny shape this year, I continue shakily, counting the minutes I have turned my mouth up into a smile- ten, my cheeks are starting to hurt- before I count the maybe-one-second time it takes to swoop down.

We are getting divorced, one of them says while my vision blurs.

Oh, I respond, oh oh ohno, tears, one, two, four, nine, thirteen and a half forming in my eyes and streaming down my face.

Look, kiddo, this was long overdue, Papa states.

I should know. I've counted eleven squabbles, fourteen whispered fights in front of friends, twenty-three yelling arguments when those friends leave and they think I'm

asleep, and not one, not two, not three, but four full blown brawls that ended in at least one of the parties fainting, crying, or both.

But this is maybe my last day here, and I don't want it to end this way.

What did you say? Mama asks, hand drawn to her mouth.

What's happening, kid, you feel sick or something? Papa adds, raising a meaty hand to my forehead.

No, I just, I start.

Shoot. I think back to the heaviness I felt last night, the building up of the heaviness I've felt so many nights before, the intensity and the foreverness of it, the weight on my chest that can't be counted.

There's just so much work I need to do and people to please and there's- there's just so much, it's so hard to be here sometimes, I say. It's easier to imagine just... leaving.

And Mama's face droops at least two inches and Papa's eyebrows scrunch in at a forty-five degree angle and they stumble over each other- something they've done at least one hundred and sixty times- that things will get better and Papa knows this great doctor from med school that can help calm my nerves and Mama heard on Facebook that herbal tea helps your mind feel ten years younger and Papa scoffs that the point is to get better, not to get younger and Mama counters that one can do both at the same time and the squabble almost elevates to a brawl before they settle down.

The point is, we're here for you, even if we don't see eye-to-eye, Mama concludes.

And we love you, Papa says, and we hug and suddenly I feel lighter.

And even though the heaviness will return and I might change my mind later, right now, I am loved and I am supported and I want to stay for as many days as I can count.

Student Name: Adriana Winkelmayr  
Grade: 11  
School: Emery Weiner School  
Title: Dance the Baile folklorico for me  
Category: Poetry  
Key: Silver Key  
Educator:

Daughter I command thee  
Dance the ballet folklorico for me

On the roof  
Make the neighbors hear the  
PAT pitter pitter PAT pitter PAT  
Of your half-Mexicana heart  
And your whole soul  
From the rusted fire escapes

PAT pitter pitter PAT pitter PAT

Let the stomp stomping  
Of your feet carry us to be  
Where we should've been  
Taken from our cities  
Living a half life through the wishes of our ancestry

PAT pitter pitter PAT pitter PAT

Let sanguine sparks fly from your calloused feet

And collide with the falling rain  
Sprouting viridescent seeds of Corn husk lilies  
Burning a Jaguar's pride into a country we call "home" and  
Stand where your abuelos once stood.  
PAT pitter pitter PAT pitter PAT

For we once were the fog flying through American cities  
People walked through and by us  
Looked for the blue in their sky and flag for faces to  
Call consider classify home

PAT pitter pitter PAT pitter PAT

While we see blue for the tears shed  
The glass shards of bones broken in the Rio Grande  
Faces of women and children under the sea  
And like a fog after a sunshine—  
We go unseen.  
PAT pitter pitter PAT pitter PAT

So make them acknowledge your presence  
Be loud as the hurricane  
As horrible as a tsunami  
And bright as the Sun  
PAT pitter pitter PAT pitter PAT

Let yourself exhume a rattled breath from the depths of your lungs  
Where you've shoved gritos and bad words and the remnants of your Latino heritage

Supply the world with your Vibora tongue and your smoking lungs

Burning inside to shake the rooftops with your song

And show them all

What it means to dance the ballet folklórico.

PAT pitter pitter PAT pitter PAT

PAT pitter pitter PAT pitter PAT

pitter pat,

pitter pat.

Student Name: Rachel Kazakevich

Grade: 8

School: Emery Weiner School

Title: Forever Missing

Category: Flash Fiction

Key: Silver Key

Educator: Elaine Lupovitch

The last thing I unpacked was the crystal figurine. I needed to make sure that it went in the best place because it was my senior year of college and my dorm needed to be perfect. I was debating where to put it and I eventually decided to place it on my nightstand.

"Ava, you coming?" my roommate Emma asked. My friends and I were planning to go out to dinner together to celebrate our last year.

"Yeah, just a second," I answered. I placed my phone down next to my figurine because I didn't need my little sister calling me every thirty seconds asking me what I was doing. I walked out of my dorm and we headed off towards the fanciest restaurant in town.

The food was amazing and it was one of the best nights of my life. We just laughed and danced and talked about our summers. It was great to have a free night before school started the next day. I knew that I probably wouldn't be able to have another night like this because I had to study if I wanted to achieve my goal of becoming a child psychologist.

It was almost midnight by the time I got back to my room. My roommate went right to sleep but I stayed up a little later to see if I could call my little sister Lily because it was only 9:00 back at home and I wanted to see how she was doing.

Lily and I have an incredible relationship. We are very very close. She is eight years younger than me but we never let that get between us. I have been to every single one of her theater performances and she visits me in college once a month. When we went to Disney World a few years ago, we got matching crystal figurines. The figurines are 4-inch statues of my sister and me hugging each other on my first day of college. It has incredible detail and I take it everywhere with me. To me and my sister, the figurine represents our relationship and if it ever got lost or it broke then I would be beyond devastated.

I grabbed my phone and called Lily because I needed to hear her voice. I saw her earlier today but I already missed her terribly. She didn't answer. She always answers me on the first ring. I tried to call her again with the same result. I picked up my figurine. What is going on Lily? Please answer, I silently begged Lily. Please.

All of a sudden my phone rings. I answered it as quickly as possible because I needed to yell at Lily. After all, she wasn't answering my phone calls, but it wasn't Lily. It was my mother.

"Hi Mom," I said, "Why are you calling me so late?" My mom started to say something, but she couldn't manage it. She started sobbing.

"Mom, what's wrong?" What happened? What's wrong? I'm getting really scared now.

"It's... I can't talk about it. Turn on Channel Five News." I grab my figurine because it is like my good luck charm now and turn on Channel Five. Emma yelled at me to turn it off because she was trying to sleep but I ignored her. I have to know what's going on.

"In the small town of Solana Beach in California, an 18-year-old boy brought a gun to Solana Beach High School and brutally murdered 21 people and injured 13 others. Three of the victims were teachers who tried to stop the boy from murdering his fellow students. The youngest victim was 14-year-old Lily Aldridge..."

The world swirls around me and I can't breathe. I feel my figurine slip through my fingers and I watch in slow motion as it falls to the floor and shatters into a million pieces. My eyes blur with tears and my throat closes up. This isn't real. It can't be. I need Lily in my life and I can't imagine my life without her. Emma asks me what's wrong but I don't hear her. I don't know how I will be able to go on without her.

Weeks pass. My grades fall from A's and B's to C's and D's. I go through each day, just barely making it through. Midterms are coming up but I barely noticed. I don't care anymore. My friends keep trying to reach out to me, but I ignore them. They wouldn't understand.

It's now Christmas break and it's time for me to go home to visit my family, but I don't go. How can I ever go back there? Everything I see reminds me of her. I can't handle it. How do I move forward? I can't keep spending my life like this. Lily wouldn't want that. She would want me to live a life of joy. She always believed in my dreams and always wanted me to be successful and even though she's gone, I want to honor her memory, so I will try to rebuild my life. After all we've been through together, it's the least I can do for her. Even though Lily is forever missing from me, I will always remember her.

Student Name: Eliot Kelly-Leftwich

Grade: 10

School: Emery Weiner School

Title: I am the South

Category: Poetry

Key: Silver Key

Educator:

i am the south,

no matter how much i can complain,

because doesn't everyone just hate their roots sometimes,

yet i was born and i have become,

the traditions and all of the sickly, crunchy words,

the ones that stick to your tongue and make your voice sweet and slow,

those words,

my life is secluded there,

remoteness of the things that make me up,

one place, one conception,

one me,

yet i think my parents are happier up north,

living the life they used to live,

one they lived without me,

don't tell them i told you.

my mother doesn't it like it down south much,

she hates the weather and the frizz of her hair,

and she won't say it, but sometimes i'm positive she wishes we lived somewhere else,  
did you know it's supposed to be 104 today?

my father passes for an extrovert up north,  
something i can't seem to manage,  
anywhere,  
and they both laugh up there in this way they don't anywhere else,  
bittersweet,

the south is my childhood bedroom,  
nowhere else has held my hand as i've grown up,  
let me stick paper onto its walls and rip paint off with tape,  
my parents' southern life is my whole life,  
the one they've had with me, lived by my side,  
and yet i think my parents are happier up north,  
this is a secret, remember?

i don't think i fit in much,  
with them, with the north,  
they tell stories i wasn't there for,  
but they tell them with such casualty,  
like maybe they forget i wasn't actually there,  
pull yourself together, just pick up the plot,

we go to the restaurants and the places they were regulars,  
and i feel like i should know what to order just like they do,  
but i stare at the menu, lost,  
and they laugh with family they know far better than i do,

because god forbid i even let family get to know me,  
wow, stop feeling bad for yourself,

my parents' southern life seems so distant,  
up north they adopt some attitude,  
something i've never known,  
i feel out of place,  
since when did my own blood feel so,  
unrelated,  
genes speak louder than words,  
they act like they've lived there their whole lives,  
like they were built to endure whatever it is up there,  
and i'm stuck with southern slang slipping into my sentences,

my parents don't say crunchy words that stick out,

i am the south,  
the life my parents have lived down there,  
and yet i think my parents are happier up north,

maybe i want to go up there to belong,  
but don't tell them, this is between you and me.

Student Name: Aviva Key-Cohen

Grade: 8

School: Emery Weiner School

Title: Life as a Moth

Category: Poetry

Key: Silver Key

Educator: Elaine Lupovitch

When butterflies glide through the clear skies they are met with praise.

They are endorsed by hands reaching out,

They are met with admiration and respect.

They are loved.

When moths flutter through the dark midnight skies, they are met with disapproval.

They are met with screams,

They are discouraged with fear and disgust.

They are shooed away and stepped on, they are hated,

Who would ever like a moth anyway?

Their unsettling brown color is no match

For the bright oranges, yellows, reds, and blues that the famous butterfly carries.

They're not pretty, their large black eyes and nighttime vigil make them unpleasant to the public.

They are underappreciated.

Butterflies are met with love,

They are met with warm hugs,

They are met with "Come sit with us!"

They are met with straight A's and perfect posture,

They are a utopia of perfection, a standard to be pedestaled but never achieved.

It is impossible to become a butterfly, as a moth.

A moth could fight it's whole life trying to be loved,

It could change everything about itself,  
Change its voice, change its personality, it could alter everything.  
Yet still, a moth will never be a butterfly.  
At some point, the moth comes to feel remorse,  
For the years it spent trying to be something else will now be a journey of recovery.  
It will realize how fragile their adolescence was,  
They will realize that their brown color and large black eyes are simply attributes of it's  
ancestry,  
It stops hating itself and realizes that if they did have the bright colors of the butterfly,  
It wouldn't match their feathered antennas.  
It realizes that the way it is is perfect for a moth,  
I mean,  
Who would ever want to be a butterfly anyways?

Student Name: Maya Holliday

Grade: 8

School: Emery Weiner School

Title: Mental Block

Category: Poetry

Key: Silver Key

Educator: Elaine Lupovitch

Mental Block

1 It's hard to think

2 Of a topic

3 For a poem

4 The thoughts radiating in my

5 Brain

6 Again

7 And again

8 Yet not an ounce

9 Of creativity

10 Not a drop

11 But even still

12 I look at the things around me

13 And I am happy

14 All of these things

15 Surrounding me like a hug

16 And yet still

17 Nothing

18 Everytime my hands hit the keyboard

19 My brain says

20 Stop

- 21 That won't work
- 22 It's not good enough
- 23 Going for a walk with my dog
- 24 Maybe this will inspire me
- 25 Nothing
- 26 Asking my friends and family
- 27 Nothing
- 28 Staring at social media for hours
- 29 No inspiration
- 30 There is still
- 31 Nothing
- 32 The agony
- 33 About not knowing what to
- 34 Type is curdling my brain
- 35 I feel it melt
- 36 Into a pool of thoughts
- 37 All not good enough
- 38 I stare at my computer screen
- 39 And there is still
- 40 Nothing.
- 41 I think I have a mental block.
- 42 So heavy
- 43 It weighs at least
- 44 A thousand pounds
- 45 I try pushing and
- 46 Pushing and
- 47 Pushing
- 48 It won't budge

- 49 I feel a tear slide down my face
- 50 I start to spiral
- 51 I think
- 52 "What if I
- 53 Don't get this
- 54 Done in time?"
- 55 I take a break and
- 56 Eat lots
- 57 And
- 58 Lots of
- 59 Ice cream
- 60 I come back to the computer and there is
- 61 Still
- 62 nothing.

Student Name: Eliya Shani  
Grade: 8  
School: Emery Weiner School  
Title: Peter Pan Was Right  
Category: Poetry  
Key: Silver Key  
Educator: Elaine Lupovitch

Peter Pan was right,  
Growing up is a waste of time.  
Lost in a world of responsibilities,  
In pursuit of a life so mundane.

Once, we were the children of wonder,  
Dreamers with hearts full of fantasies.  
We danced with fairies in moonlit skies,  
Our spirits unburdened, forever free.

But as the years unfolded,  
We traded our dreams for reality.  
We built walls of logic and reason,  
Leaving our imaginations behind.

Peter Pan's eternal youth,  
A beacon in our weary hearts.  
Heavenly smiles, laughter's proof,  
His spirit never departs.

But society demands we grow,

Leaving innocence behind.  
Responsibilities and expectations,  
A path we must now find.

Yet in our hearts, a longing lingers,  
For those carefree days of old.  
To fly again, with faith unbroken,  
In a world where dreams unfold.

Oh, how I long for Neverland,  
Where time stands still and worries cease.  
Where laughter echoes through the air,  
And innocence is forever at peace.

The weight of adulthood weighs heavy,  
Dragging us into the depths of monotony.  
We chase success and societal norms,  
Forgetting the joy of simply being.

So let us remember  
The lessons of Peter Pan's flight.  
For growing up may be a waste,  
But holding onto hope feels just about right.

Student Name: Nora Lemke  
Grade: 9  
School: Emery Weiner School  
Title: Second  
Category: Poetry  
Key: Silver Key  
Educator: Natalie Fischer

Second

The times where I come next,  
I always remember second.  
Then on and on the line stretches  
Further out in front of me.

The guilt of guilt  
I remember being second,  
Of not being first,  
But being second

The alternative option  
I still feel the second.  
Not a chance to be pitied  
For I do well and am treated well.  
But never like everyone else.

Seeing the one person one step ahead-  
Second lives in my mind  
But also seeing the many behind,  
Shouldered off for the more helpless

Knowing they need it more.

Stuck on a line

Second knows both worlds,

Of being pressured to be at the top,

And to do better when you know

You are at your limits.

Second makes sense for me

For if I am first I draw attention

It makes guilt rise up for the new second.

Because second in first

Will always remember being second.

Student Name: Chloe Pinsky

Grade: 8

School: Emery Weiner School

Title: Somewhere Along The Way

Category: Poetry

Key: Silver Key

Educator: Elaine Lupovitch

I used to go to bed tucked in, night light on

All my stuffed animals on the bed, so none would feel 'left out'

Falling asleep listening to my mom's soft, warm, comforting voice read me a story

Going to bed after a long day of playing with dolls, exhausted

I think about how somewhere along the way

Borrowing my mom's makeup became wearing it every day

Cheesy, big, gap-teeth smiles became fake smiles

Reading picture books became reading novels

I think about how fast time flies

Playdates became 'hangouts'

'Do you want to play?' became 'Do you want to call?'

Somewhere along the way a piece of me was left behind

Now everything is different

Worries became bigger

Anxiety grows stronger

I used to be excited about becoming a teenager, they were so cool, and mature

Now I wish I could go back to the beginning

And gain that piece of me back

Student Name: Nina Teichman

Grade: 10

School: Emery Weiner School

Title: Unraveled Embrace

Category: Flash Fiction

Key: Silver Key

Educator: Jessie Meadows

I am no longer swallowed by your cashmere hugs. The honey soap in your kitchen no longer runs through my fingers and down the sink. I thought a grandmother's love for her only daughter's only daughter would be unconditional. But, like you always tell me, I was wrong. The gifts and invitations to your extravagant dinners stopped flooding our mailbox and front porch. Week-long stays at your home on Leon Place became shut curtains once you saw our car pull into your driveway. I want to love you, but even though you're alive I've been mourning you for years.

Student Name: Hannah Davis  
Grade: 12  
School: Houston Christian High School  
Title: The Misunderstanding About Medusa  
Category: Poetry  
Key: Silver Key  
Educator: Jill Read

Everyone pitys me.  
Thinks I should've had a "better outcome"  
My outcome was better  
Now, how do I make it clear?  
I experienced a woman's worst fear  
What we spend our time outside of the house thinking about  
We hear it all.  
"Hold your keys like claws"  
"Dress modestly."  
"No one values honesty...  
So be nice,"  
"But don't lead them on  
They won't get the hint"  
"Take your time to lament,  
Then maybe, they'll leave you alone"  
"Be wary of an uber...  
They might not take you home"  
  
We hear these words from others,  
over and over from women who have felt the trouble

So I'm misunderstood

It happened to me, So with Athena, I Could

See, and she healed my fear

She made it so no man may touch me again

They won't even stare.

They'll all make amends

They'll all run to try and help their friends

But they won't have any luck

Because now, like me, in trauma they are stuck

They are glued in a position,

unable to get me to listen

Student Name: Alexis Zogg  
Grade: 9  
School: Incarnate Word Academy  
Title: Clean  
Category: Personal Essay & Memoir  
Key: Silver Key  
Educator: Amanda Snook

The word clean is such an important word to me. Clean, an adjective, meaning free from dirt or pollution. Clean, an adjective, meaning unadulterated and pure. Clean, an adjective, meaning much more and none of the above to me and you. The adjective, clean, is used all the time; being used to describe places, things, and most importantly to me, people. If it were up to me, I would add one more definition of clean to the dictionary I used to cite the definition of this five-lettered word: Clean, an adjective, meaning a state of being free from nightmares and troubles of your past- where you truly can miss it, but would never risk it again.

When people think of the word clean, more often than not they think of an unsoiled white fabric, or a seemingly perfect and well kept bed, not a bathroom of a catholic grade school. A catholic grade school, with blood stains all over the hexagonally checkered tile floors, motivational posters that are washed out at the edges, certainly not a bathroom stall painted a hauntingly hideous burgundy that has pieces chipped out near the edges? Wrong. Not for me, not for us. After that wretched forlorn afternoon luncheon in seventh grade, not only was the meaning of a simple adjective used everyday changed permanently for me, but a bond like no other that either of us had before was forged- out of our own blood, sweat, and tears.

Preparatory to this encounter, my unstable self was ravaging through my friends' belongings, searching for something, anything, with a point- no matter how sharp, dull, or unhygienic. Metal containers clank together, forks roll onto the floor, and I stop, finding it, a white plastic knife my friend had for her chicken breast. Snatching that utensil away, I rush off to an unclean space, a bathroom, walking in with hot tears streaming down my flushed face. My navy fleece is already discarded, it is easy for me to pull my wrists out, looking at the supple flesh, so pale, needing some color put into them in my mind. Shakily, I drag the instrument onto the skin, one slit, two slits, three slits, and blood spills. Blood, the red liquid of life, spilling down my arms, feeling similar to a repulsive layer of sweat begging to be ripped clean off, my implications of impending death. My life dangling on a lone thread of faith like a discarded puppet as she throws the door open.

Both our ingenuous eyes widen in horror and I immediately jump up, attempting to lock myself in a stall, screaming heart-breaking pleas of "GO AWAY!". Wet and sickening

emotion staining both of us, the door to my stall being thrown open, she being met with me. Even if she had not a single idea as to what in the world was going on with her friend, she jumped into action head first, and fearlessly. Wrestling the damned thing out of my hands, kicking it aside, both of us comforting each other. Confused, frightened, and blackened, we hold onto each other for dear life, whispering illusions of prayers of “everything will be alright” to each other when really we are unsure if that is true ourselves.

We get taken out of the dirtied, disgusting bathroom floor and into separate spaces, both of us clearly unwell. Though I was the one required to go home, she followed soon after, worrying herself ill for my well being. That objectively awful day, where I very nearly killed myself, ended up being the start of a beautiful friendship. Slowly, we built on each other, being a support for our shaky towers and through many split tears, and close calls, we can both scream it from the mountain tops: “I think I am finally clean...”

Student Name: Rinelle Pauline Aliboso

Grade: 10

School: Incarnate Word Academy

Title: The Woman With An Ax

Category: Dramatic Script

Key: Silver Key

Educator: Amanda Snook

Scene:

Enter Narrator to dead center; fade in downlights on center stage

Narrator [to audience]: Greed is a powerful force, causing wickedness in the world throughout. Self-motivation pushes people towards their demise, hacking away to what could have been something one day. The infamous case of Lizzie Borden portrays the embodiment of worldly desires that lay dormant in the hearts of many.

Enter SET to stage right with Andrew lying asleep on the sofa and Abby in a separate room to portray the upstairs

Fade in FRONT LIGHTS

Enter Lizzie stage left; Lizzie walks silently to the house carrying a small bottle of what may be "prussic acid" and glancing downcast upon her father

Lizzie: Good day father.

Andrew: [awakens temporarily] Hello Lizzie, where have you been today?

Lizzie: I have been walking around town, finding new things to purchase as usual.

Andrew: You hardly leave the house often, let alone being away for this long.

Lizzie: Perhaps. Aren't I too old to stay indoors all day?

Andrew: Thirty-two is a reasonable age, considering you are unmarried.

Lizzie: Ah, seems so. I shall go say hello to Emma now, I did not see her today.

Andrew: Say your greetings to Abby as well.

Lizzie: And I will now. Enjoy your rest father, it has been quite a day.

Lizzie exits the room and is approached by Emma walking in from stage right

Emma: Hello dearest sister, it has been since yesterday that I last saw you.

Lizzie: Indeed. How is Mrs. Borden doing today?

Emma: She has been doing better than usual, considering that her family has a new place to live.

Lizzie: Oh? Where do they reside now?

Emma: Father granted them some property nearby Falls River. I find it disappointing that they get property and we do not.

Lizzie: It is rather infuriating, isn't it? For we are the children of his own blood and yet we earn nothing of his properties.

Emma: Yes, I do find it rather odd. I do not find much reason to take her to my liking.

Lizzie: We have had years of her presence and she still is somewhat invasive to us.

Emma: Your statement poses some validity, however, we cannot do much.

Lizzie: We together may not, but I know I do have a viable solution for now. Where is Mrs. Borden currently?

Emma: She is in the other room upstairs. Are you going to greet her?

Lizzie: I might.

Exit Lizzie from downstairs rooms; change set so that it shows the kitchen and the room where Mrs. Borden sits on her bed

Lizzie: I shall make her a meal to eat. It is late and I have intentionally neglected her presence recently and so this will make up for it.

Lizzie begins to cook a simple meal while adding drops of prussic acid to stew, in hopes of poisoning Mrs. Borden

Emma: What do you have there dear sister?

Lizzie: Nothing, only some prussic acid.

Emma: I trust your judgment. Wait— acid?

Lizzie: To aid in her digestion of course.

Emma: Once again, I do trust your judgment.

Exit Emma, Lizzie walks towards Mrs. Borden

Lizzie: Mrs. Borden

Abby: Lizzie!

Lizzie: I made you your supper.

Abby: Why, thank you. I do find it peculiar that you made me my meal tonight because we eat our meals separately.

Lizzie: I figured that after twenty nine years we may as well begin to make amends.

Abby: Ah.

Lizzie: Yes, any day now.

Abby: Once again, thank you for the meal.

Lizzie: Good night Mrs. Borden.

Blackout for 8 Seconds

Fade in wash and Front Lights

Enter Lizzie into the same room

Lizzie: Good morning, Mrs. Borden.

Abby: Good Morning.

Lizzie: How do you feel today?

Abby: I feel wonderful!

Lizzie (to herself): I should've added more of that prussic acid— it seemed to take hardly any effect on her health and overall well-being

Abby: Is everything alright dear?

Lizzie: I'm doing good right now.

Abby: That's nice to hear. You should go and help your father with his other errands— he's been at work all day earning money just for us!

Lizzie: Yes, perhaps I shall go now. Maybe I should go help in our garden area.

Abby: Excellent idea. Oh! I think he might be home now. Let him rest on the couch as he does nearly every day.

Rotate set to living room

Bring in set pieces for GARDEN SHED

Lizzie: Hello Father! How was work?

Andrew (in a tired voice): Excellent daily, I am earning well again to invest in additional property.

Lizzie: That's good to hear. Per request of Mrs. Borden, I can run some errands for you sir.

Andrew: Thank you Lizzie. Could you please clean the shed and remove anything that clutters?

Lizzie: Of course.

Exit Lizzie; Fade out FRONT LIGHT on the set

Lizzie retrieves her ax and slowly (silently) trudges back to the set as FRONT LIGHTS fade back in

A single DOWNLIGHT falls upon Lizzie

Lizzie: Oh, how my dear father and stepmother truly deserve their terrible fates to come soon. I never took my stepmother, or preferably Mrs. Borden, to much liking— she seemed quite artificial in many senses. Father himself owns a large balance of nearly three hundred thousand dollars with a large estate in which we reside as a family. However, there is no true family in the Borden household. I, one of their very children, highly doubt their marriage is real in the sense that she is here to inherit only. No woman can truthfully be as false as she— she portrays herself as the ideal housewife and is conveniently, overly caring and amiable to us. I sense the unhealthy tensions within the cages of their false marriage; Mrs. Borden only married my father to inherit the money he possesses. The inheritance of my father should be given to Emma and I. My dearest sister— she understands the shared disdain we hold against Mrs. Borden. The two of us are our father's true, biological children— it is only right that we receive his wealth before Mrs. Borden and her family ever do one day. Quite recently, he granted her family a house to reside in before sharing the family property with us. That Falls River Property granted to Abby's sister should have been ours. Why did he feel it was necessary to offer such large, bountiful property to a woman who is not our family? I shall make it very clear to her that I can understand her scheme— our domestic interactions seem quite strained. We separate ourselves for familial meals and she sends the facade of her love towards my direction. I am blind to what my dear father sees in her; she is a woman who seemingly neglects the true aspects of family. With the mutual hatred mother and daughter make known to each other, perhaps he does not love us both. Emma and I still

hold my father closer to our hearts and rather not Mrs. Borden, but he deserves the same fate as she. To love another woman who does not love the children of her husband is wicked! Nearing soon, they shall deeply feel my wrath.

Lizzie walks toward her mother; while she is walking, BLACKOUT stage

Fade in RED WASH with FRONT LIGHTS on Lizzie as she moves further upstage holding the ax in her hand

Abby: Lizzie? Why is your father's ax in your hand..?

Lizzie: I'm only trying to reclaim what is mine.

Abby: Don't speak that nonsense here.

Lizzie: It's not nonsense. I know you're trying to take my father's estate and his property once he is gone.

Abby: That's not true! I swear on my life— Andrew! Emma! Lizzie, N—

She takes 20 slashes to Abby's body, leaving her fallen upon the ground in her blood.

Lizzie: Good riddance, his inheritance is back where it belongs.

Lizzie walks downstairs towards her father, ax leaving a trail behind

Lizzie: I can get this done and over with now.

She walks to him sleeping on the couch

Andrew: Hello Liz— what are you doing? Is that my ax? Abby! Emma!

Lizzie: I can't believe you could be so blind! (tears break) She was trying to deceive you to take your money!

Andrew: Why would you say that?

Lizzie: See, you don't understand because you've been so blindsided with her facade! The Borden's legacy will continue with Emma and I, not with a woman who lusts for your wealth.

She takes ten hacks to his body

Lizzie begins to audibly cry and fade out

After ten seconds of RED WASH; fade out FRONT LIGHTS and then RED WASH

fade in downlighting on [narrator]

Narrator: And with that, selfishness can drive a woman to commit such mortal sins against her own family. The haunting tale of Lizzie Borden continues to stab fear upon the hearts of many today. God forbid, who shall fall victim next?

Blackout

[curtain call]

SCENE

Student Name: Oishani Banerjee  
Grade: 10  
School: iSchool High at University Park  
Title: Arjuns Wives  
Category: Short Story  
Key: Silver Key  
Educator:

### Prologue

In the epic Mahabharat, the Pandavas are five brothers who are the main characters. Arjun is known for his warrior skills, and Nakula is known for being very handsome. Arjun has had relationships with many women from different regions in India. Some he courted for romantic reasons, and some he courted for political reasons.

His wives described in this story are:

- 1) Draupadi (main wife who married the other four Pandavas),
- 2) Subhadra (Dwarka's princess, also Sri Krishna's sister),
- 3) Ulupi (the Naga princess), and
- 4) Chitrangada (warrior princess of Manipur in northeast India. She belonged in a matriarchal society).

### The Story

The Pandavas were enjoying a day outside when Nakula approached Arjun. "Okay so I was thinking, I'm supposed to be the most handsome Pandava, literally everyone says so."

"Okay and? Did you come here just to brag?" Arjun asked.

"A little, but nah bro, I need your advice on something. How do you pull so many girls?"

Arjun grinned, "Well you know, I've got that W rizz, girls are just dying to marry me."

Nakula rolled his eyes, "Yeah yeah sure, but what do you actually do? What do you say to make them like you so much?"

"Simple, all I do is..." Arjun paused, "wait actually I don't really do anything. Most of the girls I've been with made the first move."

"Like actually? What about Draupadi? How'd you pull her? Didn't you say you won an archery contest to get married to her?"

"I mean I did, but ultimately it was Draupadi that set everything up. She set up the archery contest because she knew I was the best at it. Also she totally rejected Karna so I'd definitely win."

Nakula looked impressed. "Damn she wanted you bad. Do you think she was disappointed when she got the rest of us?"

Draupadi overhearing this walked up to where they were sitting and offered her input. "Think about it this way: I'd been crushing on this guy for a while, so I set up a competition to marry him. Everything goes to plan, except now I'm being told that I'm marrying 5 guys instead of one. Do you really think I was disappointed to be marrying 5 princes that were wise, strong, skilled in battle, knowledgeable, and super hot?"

Nakula blushed, "I mean, when you put it that way..."

"It's also really convenient. Remember that time I was cooking and didn't have 3 of the spices I needed? I sent you guys and Sahadeva out simultaneously, so I could get dinner done in time," she explained.

"Oh yeah! I remember that! We made it a competition to see who would get their spice first." said Nakula.

Draupadi rolled her eyes affectionately, "You guys are so cute. Anyways, Arjun tell us, were any other wives as forward as me?"

"Yeah for sure, there was Ulupi, the Naga princess and also-"

"Whoa, whoa, whoa you married a Naga princess!" Nakula exclaimed.

Arjun nodded, "She was widowed, but she said she wanted a child with me because of my physique and warrior skills."

"What did you say to make her want you like that?" Nakula asked.

"Um, I don't actually remember, this was during my exile era," Arjun grinned sheepishly, "but I got her number so we can ask her."

"Oh my god we can call her? We're going to talk to a Naga princess? I'm going to see a Naga princess and talk to a Naga princess!"

Arjun rolled his eyes, "Are you done fanboying? Her name is Ulupi, like I said, and you better not embarrass me in front of her. Also," he said turning to Draupadi, "you still want to be here, right? You're not going to get jealous right?"

"Why would I specifically ask about her and then get jealous? I would tell you if there was a problem," she said incredulously.

"You're right, my bad. That wasn't feminist of me, and you taught me better than that," he apologized.

He dialed Ulupi's number, with Nakula and Draupadi huddled close to him. After four rings, she picked up.

"Arjun? Is that you? How have you been?" her voice filtered melodiously through the device.

"It's been pretty good! I'm with Draupadi and Nakula right now. They uh, they wanted to know..." he trailed off and looked away, blushing.

"We wanted to know how you and Arjun got together!" Nakula cut in.

Ulupi blinked in surprise, "Oh okay. Both of you want to know?"

"Yes please! Also I love that saree, you look so pretty in turquoise," said Draupadi enthusiastically.

"Oh thank you!" she smiled, "I'm trying to remember how I asked him. I remember seeing him fight. He was so powerful, and I was intrigued by that. Once I found out it was Arjun, I immediately started thinking about the potential our heir could have. Arjun knows this already, but romance wasn't my biggest motivator. Our genes combined would have been a very powerful gift to my kingdom."

"How did he ask you out?" asked Nakula.

Ulupi raised an eyebrow, "Him ask me? No, I approached him with my proposition. I didn't see any point in dating, seeing as we both had other priorities on our minds."

"Yeah I didn't really do anything except look good while fighting," said Arjun.

"Oh I have a diplomacy thing in a bit. I have to go, but it was fun catching up! Bye!" Ulupi waved and hung up.

"She's so elegant, I want her number," sighed Draupadi.

"Who else did you pull? Or I guess more accurately, who else pulled you?" asked Nakula.

"Oh! Chitrangada! We also got married while I was exiled."

"Wait as in the warrior princess Chitrangada?"

"The one and only. Let me call her."

As soon as he called her number, a woman on the other end sternly asked, "Name and reason for contact?"

"It's Arjun, I wanted to talk to Chitrangada."

The woman scoffed, "Yeah so does everyone else in this region. If you don't have an appointment, wait for us to call you back." With that said, she hung up.

Arjun grimaced, "I forgot about that. She's the busiest person I know, and her secretary is...intense."

"Aww, so we can't talk to your hot warrior princess wife?" Nakula pouted.

"Patience, patience. She'll call us back. While we wait, I can tell you another story about that time when an entire clan chased after me because I tried to wife up this other girl."

Nakula dissolved into laughter, "Wait, like actually? Which girl?"

"You know her, it was Subhadra."

Both Draupadi and Nakula's jaw dropped. "No way!" they exclaimed in unison.

"But-but she's so chill! I've never heard her raise voice! Ever!" said Draupadi.

"And her brother is Krishna! As in your best friend Krishna! Did you break bro code?" asked Nakula hysterically.

"No no, he actually set us up. Because basically we had this insane chemistry, and I really wanted to marry her, but Balaram was not having it. Wait; call her over, we can tell the story together."

Once Subhadra came over, the trio filled her in about the conversation.

"Oh yeah, that was funny," she giggled, "I don't think anyone expected me to run away with a guy, but Arjun was very tempting."

She continued, "We were hosting him at our place, when Krishna noticed our flirting. He gave us a solid escape plan, with one small caveat: I would have to drive the getaway chariot."

Arjun shuddered, "That was the most terrifying experience of my life. I'm over here shooting arrows to defend us, and she's actively trying to kill us in a chariot accident."

"Okay listen," Subhadra snapped, "my entire family was out for our blood, I think prioritizing speed over traffic laws was one of my better decisions."

"No, because she was going 60 in a dense forest, swerving around trees every half second. Does bad driving run in the family?" Arjun snarked.

"Ask my brother to drive your chariot in a high stakes situation and find out just how-"\*

Suddenly, the phone rang, cutting off Subhadra. Arjun scrambled to answer it and ended up face to face with Chitragada.

"I have ten minutes at most, so you'd better make this quick. What is it?" she demanded.

"Princess, I'm here with my brother Nakula and my wives Draupadi and Subhadra. My request for you is to recount the story of our marriage," Arjun stated.

Chitrangada leveled him with a glare. "Are you seriously telling me to spend ten minutes of my day telling you and your friends a love story?"

"Yes?" he said, flashing a smile.

She rolled her eyes. "Fine. I have a short break before I start training. I'm doing arms today," she said as she flexed her biceps.

The four of them watched her, transfixed on her muscles. She lowered her arms and grinned at their reactions before continuing. "We first met when I was on a hunting trip with my friends. I shot him, he forgave me, and I was infuriated."

"How were you infuriated if you shot him?" asked Nakula meekly.

"He was obviously going easy on me! I hate when people do that! Anyways, I unfortunately was afflicted with feelings for him and asked him out. He rejected me."

"You're so stupid!" Nakula said, berating Arjun for his actions.

"Don't worry I didn't take it personally. I was a different person back then, I didn't have the balance I have today," she said drily, "I approached it from a more strategic angle. His type wasn't a masculine tomboy. His type wasn't me. I made a deal with the God of Love to make myself feminine and beautiful to him for a year."\*\*

She paused, lost in the memory. "I almost lost myself. Don't do what I did. It was the worst mistake I made. I hated that year of beauty."

Subhadra shifted in her seat, "I like being feminine," she said softly.

"Are you even listening to me? Imagine a year of doing annoying, pointless things that drain your energy and leave you unsatisfied. Imagine waking up every day and feeling wrong, but keeping the illusion going because at least Arjun's still with you. Imagine looking in the mirror and despising the lie, but ignoring it because you've never felt this beauty before. And after all of this, after dating him for a year, he gets bored of the beauty."

Subhadra exhaled a soft breath, "I understand now."

Chitrangada nodded, "It was the change I couldn't handle, not the lifestyle itself. I knew I wasn't her, no matter how hard I tried to be. Arjun started asking about me. The real Chitrangada. The feared warrior princess. After much persistence, he finally wore me down, and I revealed myself. He liked my talent, my strength, he liked me. I negotiated the terms of our marriage, such as the rights to my son.\*\*\* And that was pretty much it."

Arjun winced, "I'm sorry you went through that because of me."

"Don't worry, failures are the pillars of success. I'm glad I learned that lesson before I earned the responsibility I have today. The experience changed me in both good and bad ways. But now, I understand the balance I have within me. And our relationship turned out okay in the end. I'm glad we're married, we make a good duo on the battlefield."

An alarm started beeping, startling everyone in the room.

"Break's over, I've got to go. Bye," said Chitrangada as she hung up.

"So in conclusion, Chitrangada also orchestrated your whole relationship by herself," said Nakula.

"Yeah. She was so strong. I'm glad I married her as well."

Draupadi turned to Subhadra, "We should have days where we talk to Ulupi and Chitrangada about kingdom and relationship stuff. They would have really good perspectives on our problems."

"Yes for sure!" cheered Subhadra. She and Draupadi left, leaving the boys alone.

"I'm never asking you for relationship advice again. You don't even do anything! The girls end up doing everything for you!" said Nakula as he stormed off. "I'm asking Bhima next time!" he called over his shoulder.

"Okay man, you do that!" said Arjun while laughing.

#### Footnotes:

\*Arjun did in fact ask Krishna to drive his chariot in a high stakes situation. This situation was the Kurukshetra war that is kind of the whole point of the Mahabharata.

\*\*Although this isn't written in the original Mahabharata, Rabindranath Tagore's drama provided the interpretation of Chitrangada being turned "beautiful" for a year.

\*\*\*The agreement was that Chitrangada would retain sole custody of their son Bavruvahan, and that he would never participate in any future wars as a representative of his father's clan.

Student Name: Wende Wang  
Grade: 12  
School: Kinkaid School  
Title: High School Creative Writing Portfolio  
Category: Portfolio Category(Writing)  
Key: Silver Key  
Educator: Angelique Jamail

### Bus Fight

"I'm sorry, you said you need me to kill a bus?"

Parraya Alcyn, wizard college sophomore and part-time hired goon, stood in front of her boss' plastic table that he called his 'executive desk,' in his dingy rented office space right next to the fantasy equivalent of a failing Jimmy John's. Her face was an odd mix of tentative confusion and tired exasperation. She wasn't entirely sure she heard the elf correctly, but she had the sinking feeling that she did, and that feeling turned to outright nauseous dread as he nodded and gave her a polite grin behind his thick-rimmed glasses. He patiently explained in a chipper voice,

"Yep! Looks like some kind of nasty gremlin-thing got into the wiring. Broke out of the school bus depot and went on a seventy-mile-an-hour rampage through the streets last night, and it's been doing donuts in the Boria Junior High owlhockey field for the last three hours. The school district people wanted someone to take care of it, and they couldn't pay the fee for the cops, so! It's up to you."

Before answering, Parraya took a sip from her daily free paper cup of instant coffee, oversaturated with powder to the point it was more of a smoothie experience, and contemplated the punchability of the pale, knobby-faced pencil pusher before her. The blackish roast sludge went down her throat, and she once again relegated that fantasy to another day.

"Mister la'rylai..."

She thought for a second about her words, again carefully maneuvering her brain away from the thought of clocking him across the face with a spiked club. She normally only did minor jobs with the bottom-of-the-barrel private fixer office she'd found herself working for: security for shady local businesses, clearing magically mutated dire cockroaches out of people's basements, and delivery of weird-smelling packages she wasn't allowed to know the contents of. Hunting feral public transportation seemed like a bit of a step up, and she doesn't think she had the health insurance for it.

"With all due respect. I don't think I could fight a bus. Sir."

"Ah, nonsense! You've dispatched unruly spirits before, and I know you're just right for this job. In fact..."

He reached back to open a filing cabinet and flipped through a few folders before pulling out two dark green hand grenades. Parraya quickly looked over them to make sure the pins were still in as he handed them to her.

"I want you to have these! They were my grandmother's. They served her well in the war against the Kingdom of Horrors, and I know they'll serve you well against this bus. Now, go! I believe in you!"

Parraya looked down at the grenades on the executive desk and then back at him, blankly staring at his grinning, pointy-eared face for a few moments before he broke the silence in the same cheery, faux-motivational singsong.

"You're fired if you don't!"

That got her to at least sigh and nod her head, mentally adding another data point to her theory that he was actively trying to kill her. As terrible as working at a borderline criminal discount odd jobs establishment was, it was a good resume builder, and the hours were better than retail and food service. She grabbed the grenades and carefully stuck them into the lurid orange denim overalls of her employee uniform before turning her back and storming out into the indifferent concrete of the run-down business park parking lot. The sky was grey and overcast, and she noted that it wasn't bad bus hunting weather as she got into her two-seat sedan.

"bus weak points"

"structural weak points of school bus"

Parraya typed into her phone while she was waiting at a red light, reading over a surprisingly useful page about breaking into school buses when she heard a from the car behind her. She glanced up at the road and muttered the words for "forward, mighty steed" in some ancient draconic tongue, and the glowing runes on the dashboard sputtered to life as she felt the accelerator unlock under her foot. She glanced back down at the enchanted device in her hand as its smoky, ethereal screen buzzed with a text from her girlfriend.

💖acherys, love of life 💖

Hey are you at work right now? Taking a break from ritual writing, wanted to maybe call if you're open.

She fully took her eyes off the road as she replied,

about to be run over by bus :(

sorry mon cheri

She glanced up, noting the SLOW - SCHOOL ZONE sign and the faint sound of tires shredding grass in the distance, then returned her eyes to her phone as she drove forward.

What??

Everything okay?

yeah for now but any advice re: exorcism would be nice

bossman said it was gremlin in bus

still got ghost stuff in back what do i do

As she was starting to type another message, her thought was interrupted by the realization that she was about to hit a parked truck. She stomped the brake, praying that her garbage car hadn't developed yet another inexplicable magic problem in the half hour she'd been driving, and to her relief, it juddered to a stop. She glanced around and saw the shape of a big yellow bus flailing around on a middle school owlhockey field on the other side of the school building, its tracks having dug a circle of raised earth into the grassy multi-tiered skate park-esque sports arena. As she stepped out of her car, she noticed a few kids out and about; it looked like they hadn't cancelled school despite a ten-ton vehicle actively rampaging through part of the grounds.

Okay so for a gremlin I think you'd need to do a salt circle thing on the object it's possessing? Found this sigil online.

Parraya glanced at the attachment, a screenshot from some home maintenance site about disinfecting haunted appliances, as she opened the trunk and started rifling through the pile of loose weapons and occult hardware. She tied her hair back and put on an old motorcycle helmet, turning for a second to make sure the bus was still in its place ruining the owlhockey field.

Stay safe please?

I looked up the bus thing on the news, hope you're okay

As she affixed a set of knee and elbow pads, traced the glyph onto the back of a receipt in her pocket, and took a big plastic salt shaker from a toolbox in the trunk, she quickly typed out,

ill be fine

love you

before setting her phone down. Even though it was, like most of what Parraya owned, one of the cheapest available models, she still couldn't afford to have it broken. She looked over the rest of her supplies for anything that could be useful, stuffing the salt shaker into her overalls' tool belt and settling on a stolen fire ax and a disposable plastic bottle she'd

filled with holy water, cursing herself for not having bought that grappling hook when she had had the chance. She considered a pistol sitting in the corner next to a portable spice rack, but decided it wouldn't quite have the stopping power, and took a voice-amplifying wand before slamming the trunk shut. Geared up, she started to make her way around the school to the owlhockey field, shouting through the wand that she was here to take care of the bus infestation as she walked.

The noise and acrid smell got stronger as she approached— a real diesel engine, she noted. The few straggler middle schoolers dissipated as she yelled at them to get back inside, and soon enough, she was standing at the edge of the owlhockey field, holding her ground as the bus swerved closer before rocketing off again, digging a huge circular trench into the dirt. It didn't seem to notice her, and Parraya snuck to an overpass about fifteen feet over the bus' circling range, debating safe ways to get its attention without getting too close. Experimentally, she took one of her boss' illegal heirloom grenades, squeezing the safety latch and creeping to the ledge of the overpass. She held her breath and watched the bus go around and around for a few cycles before pulling the pin and hurriedly dropping it, hoping to catch it on its next pass.

Parraya watched the grenade bounce off the roof and land in the dirt, the bus speeding off before it burst with a thunderous boom, scorching the dirt and sending some of it flying into the field, but the bus swerved happily down its path. She huffed as she pulled out the second grenade, considering what to do next. She didn't want to risk landing on it, and she didn't have anything to disable its tires. Maybe she could go back to the trunk—

SCREEEEEEEEEEEECH

Parraya heard the boneshaking noise from below her, and it sounded like a bus horn, albeit magnified to deafening levels even through her helmet, and as it rang out, she looked down to see the thing's tire spinning in the charred ditch the grenade had left. She barely had time to think about whether it noticed her before she saw it turn with supervehicular acceleration, rocketing on a level section of field to one end of the overpass she was standing on. She saw its searingly bright headlights aimed at her as it swung around to turn onto the raised structure, and she panicked, diving to the side as it barreled past her previous position.

She landed on her stomach with a thud, her body aching as she scrambled to her feet, collecting the ax from where it fell beside her. She turned to see the bus crash through one of the owlhockey field's seven goalposts on the other side of the overpass, bringing the structure down as it backed up and turned to charge at her once more, its horn blasting the deafening screech into the air. She noticed people starting to leave the school building behind her— hopefully evacuating and not coming to check out the loud noise, but she didn't have the time to look. She dashed to the other side of one of the owlhockey field's deeper penalty pits, hoping to keep it between her and the bus as she tried to buy a few seconds to think of something, but it was going much faster than she was. As it

reversed a few feet, angling to turn around the pit, she fumbled with the other grenade, hoping to drop it under the bus when it next charged at her position.

The bus swerved around the edge of the pit with barely enough room to fit, and Parraya glanced down into the cylindrical hole in the earth as it approached— shallow enough to serve as an escape path if she needed it, but she wasn't going to be getting out if that was the case. The bus didn't give her long to consider her options, though, and after just a few seconds, it had a clear angle to barrel towards her. She dropped the grenade, realizing the instant afterwards she had forgotten to pull the pin, but she wasn't going to risk trying to pick it back up. It almost clipped Parraya's foot as she dodged to the side, and she took a swing at it with the ax as it passes, reasoning as she does that she could maybe break a window and get inside— and the force tore it from her hands almost immediately after she does, leaving it stuck in the metal.

The bus let out another screech, like a roar of pain, and Parraya noticed her ears starting to ring as it swerved to face her again. She takes a deep breath, knowing that she couldn't keep dodging around it, and it wasn't slowing down. There was a part of her brain telling her to run, screaming of how much danger she was in, but she let the pounding of blood drown it out as she sprinted to a nearby hill in the field. Taking a deep breath, she turned to stare down its headlights as it towards her, and in the split second before it approached the slope, she leapt forward, tucking her legs in and shutting her eyes tight.

The hood caught her on the side, and immediately after, her body plowed through the windshield, icy spikes of sharpness accompanying the burst of dull pain as she crashed through the glass. She skidded down the cold metal of the bus aisle, stopping when her leg caught on a seat with a sharp tug at something in her thigh.

Parraya felt herself stagger to her feet, sore all over and aching down to her bones, her legs weak from the impact. She clutched the seat to right herself as the bus alarm screeched to life over her head, blaring in her ears and making her head pound with the intense red strobe. She pushed forward, the bus pitching to the sides to try and knock her off balance, and after she got to the dashboard, she sighed and unscrewed the top of the saltshaker.

She heard a voice, screaming from the radio in a garbled static, as loud as the sirens from the ceiling.

STOP

LEAVE AND I WILL SPARE YOU

Parraya blinked as she took the receipt and the holy water from her pocket, dripping blood from a shallow cut on the back of her hand. She didn't respond to the voice as she doused the dashboard in holy water, and she heard the gremlin inside scream through the radio, its voice loud enough to rumble under her feet.

I WAS SO CLOSE TO COMPLETING THE CIRCLE

THERE WAS SO MUCH POWER

Parraya dumped the rest of the holy water down the radio speakers, letting herself tune out the voice and focus on the sirens instead as she started to reproduce the circle, the salt starting to glow and stick to the surface of the dashboard as it mixed with the holy water. She heard the gremlin screech as she completed the sigil, the holes and screens in the dash starting to glow brilliant white, and then she felt the bus underneath her make a sudden U-turn, the steering wheel whirling as she almost lost her balance.

WE DIE TOGETHER THEN

That sentence, in the garbled, dying mess of the bus' sound system, sent a shock down her spine, and she realized the bus was barreling towards the brick wall of the school building. She grabbed the steering wheel, trying to wrestle control of the bus from the spirit in its engine for a moment, but it wasn't budging, and in a few seconds, she tried the door instead— but she realized that she had no idea how to make it open. In a last-ditch effort as it got closer to ramming into the building, she scrambled to the back of the bus and pulled the emergency exit, kicking the door open and leaping out into the parking lot as the bus crumpled against the wall. She tumbled forward as she hit the ground, narrowly avoiding tripping face-first into the concrete as she heard the bus' horn slowly die behind her. Thankfully, it wasn't followed by the sound of the wall collapsing; she turned to see the bus had partially broken through it, but not enough to take it down.

Dazed, Parraya watched the children and faculty file back into the school in orderly lines as she walked back to her car. She took her phone from where it sat by the toolbox, reading the new notifications as she opened a plastic bag labeled FIRST AID and started to bandage up some of the cuts she'd taken.

Alright, love

If you end up needing a healer, I think I can get someone from school

You okay?

There was a missed call from a few minutes ago, and the feeling came back to Parraya's mind with a jolt as she blinked and went to reply, her fingers starting to shake.

aaaaaasadvafjdgsvghjfahgvagjhhga

am alive

not in hospital

you want me to pick something up for dinner? :)

As she saw the typing notification come up after a second, Parraya smiled, her face aching and leaking more than a bit of blood, and climbed back into the driver's seat.

Student Name: Lawson O'Donnell

Grade: 8

School: Kinkaid School

Title: A Hole in the Wall

Category: Poetry

Key: Silver Key

Educator: Angelique Jamail

The evening was perfect for celebrating America's birthday.

My cousins and I sat on the porch of the old South Carolina beach house, watching my uncle set off fireworks from the dock.

I remember watching the sky as fiery eruptions crossed the stars, each one banging loudly before shimmering down into the water no longer part of the celebration in the sky.

Only one of the fireworks remained dull and lifeless.

Back at the house, my uncle tossed it carelessly into the laundry room trash can where it lay quietly while appearing asleep in its sad demise.

That night, when the house was quiet and its inhabitants were sleeping, the deceased firework rose from the dead, and in its rage, tore an enormous hole in the laundry room wall.

My uncle is banned from using fireworks.

Student Name: Benjamin Farahbod

Grade: 11

School: Kinkaid School

Title: A Life With a Zing

Category: Poetry

Key: Silver Key

Educator: Angelique Jamail

Nothing's impossible; the path is profound;

Your own voice makes your spirit rebound.

Embrace the glorious mess you are.

Among life's roar, be the star.

Finite disappointments, accept and bear.

Hope's mystique is a melody to ensnare.

What sets you apart, sets you free.

It makes you who you are; let your spirit be.

Discipline and perseverance, two words so sweet,

To try and reach for the stars; to meet and greet.

Though we can't go back and start again,

We can always ask for help from a friend.

Never give up, the journey is worthwhile,

Stay true to yourself; let your heart smile.

Be kind to yourself, let your spirit sing,

For that is everything; a life with a zing.

Student Name: Helen Zhang  
Grade: 11  
School: Kinkaid School  
Title: A Poet's Burden  
Category: Personal Essay & Memoir  
Key: Silver Key  
Educator: Angelique Jamail

The warmth of a screen, the comforting grooves of a keyboard so ancient I have to force my fingers into the worn tissue of plastic machinery to paint words onto a blank page, I type the word cold and shake my head.

Maybe cold like the softness of newfound snow, glittering white and iridescent in faint moonlight, snow painting the world in a coat of pearls.

Maybe cold like the quiet that follows grief, a gray emptiness you used to fill, I laugh but even as I do the shadow of loss floods my mouth with bile.

The word cold isn't quite right either way, so I reach across the keyboard and press a button.

My page resets, black trips over black as it tries to disappear into the white void of possibility, my screen is clear once more.

For every unwanted letter, the delete button is there to undo it. It's positioned near the top of the keyboard, far from my wandering fingers, so each press is a concrete decision, each erased figure a necessary casualty.

This is the necessity of the delete button. It keeps composition in check, it decomposes words back into their base nutritional value to be reused and made better.

Many of my peers prefer to write poetry on paper. They say the lack of a delete button makes each decision more concrete, each mistake etched into the author's memory.

Me? I prefer the gentle clicks of plastic keys, the hum of computers and of my own mind. I choose the delete button, because where people see lost words I see space for growth. By erasing the word cold, I can replace it with any word or phrase I see fit. Yes, I lost an initial idea, but the removal of that word is necessary for better words to take its place.

So I write poetry on my computer. I take each glowing word and trace it to the next, noun follows verb follows adverb until something isn't quite right.

That's where the delete button comes in, refining and polishing my ideas until they are ready for the world to see.

Last week, I stood in the echoing cavern of my school's dance studio, the bitter plastic of my earbuds vibrating in song as I tried in vain to choreograph the next four eight-counts of my dance. I was stuck on one move, a kick into a split that seemed too contrived to flow in tandem with the rest of the piece. Frustrated, I let the music thunder through my veins and tumble out of my mouth. Hearing harsh tones flow into soft melodies, I was reminded of a poem I'd written earlier. I couldn't help but smile.

Delete, delete, delete.

With that, I restarted the section with a kick into a turn, savoring this language of motion, because my words have aided my body in finding the delete button at last.

I write this piece on a computer, typing away until I have Frankenstein's monster of a creation, a kaleidoscope of bizarre phrases and random descriptions thrown in to appear more poetic. I've deleted phrases and put them back in only to delete them moments later, but each press of that all-too-important button brings me closer to understanding my true meaning, each absorption of black into white only means more room for growth. A poet never wants to erase something they believe came from their soul, but the delete button is so much more than something that undoes your mistakes because this page is far too small to hold the creativity of a burgeoning mind, and each word removed just means a better one will replace it.

With the press of a button, the word frigid replaces cold. I smile.

Student Name: Eshaan Mani  
Grade: 12  
School: Kinkaid School  
Title: Alum is caught in conflict in Israel  
Category: Journalism  
Key: Silver Key  
Educator: Angelique Jamail

When Kinkaid alumnus Mr. Canaan Estes, '23, flew to Jerusalem, Israel, for his gap year before college, he didn't expect to be escaping a warzone some months later.

Mr. Estes had been participating in the Young Judea Year Course, a Jewish educational program in Israel, before attending Brown University.

"I spend my fall semester in Jerusalem taking classes in history, religion, politics, and Hebrew," he said. "In the spring, I have an internship and live mostly on my own with my friends in Tel Aviv. That was the plan, at least."

When he first heard rockets at 6:30 a.m. on Oct. 7, he was in Tzfat, in the northern part of Israel, celebrating the holiday of Simchat Torah. He said he didn't pay much heed to the firing.

"Rockets are a common thing here, so we didn't really understand the severity of it until later we got reports about breaches into Israel," Mr. Estes said. "Once we found that out, we were terrified."

The Year Course program worked to move students away from areas of conflict despite the desire to not cancel the program. Young Judea has been running for nearly 70 years and has never once canceled its Year Course despite conflicts such as the Yom Kippur War, Lebanon War or the Intifadas.

"The program has been helpful in getting us to safe places. We have been very fortunate for that," Mr. Estes said. "However, the program wanted to keep carrying on in its location

and it's still a little jarring to try and do that. They are stressed — as are we — so it's been a mix of success."

Though Mr. Estes and his peers were initially far from the Gaza attacks, rumors that the Lebanese terrorist organization Hezbollah would join forced the Year Course to evacuate south to Jerusalem.

"The call was a good one as Hezbollah started firing things into Israel the next day," Mr. Estes said. "Jerusalem is safe because so much of the city is shared with the Arab population...Still, we were in and out of bomb shelters a few times."

Students were confined to their dorms and not allowed to leave campus. They scrambled to decide whether they wanted to leave the country on one of the few departing flights or stay.

Mr. Estes' family chose to fly him out to Europe to wait out the conflict for some weeks.

"Israel is supposed to be our home for the next year; having to leave now feels like admitting defeat," he said. "I've been with my closest friends so far during the war. They have been my rock. Now that I'm leaving them, I'm not sure what I'm gonna do without them."

As Mr. Estes boarded an airplane on the tarmac, he was hopeful but also understood the probability of his airplane taking off was low.

"Many flights get canceled because of incoming rockets, and few airlines are willing to take the economic risk of cancelation," he said.

He flew first to Lisbon, Portugal, and then to Brussels, Belgium, where he plans to wait out the conflict. Most of his peers stayed in the southern part of Israel for an extra week but a large number are leaving.

Mr. Estes said the Kinkaid community has been a source of support at this time.

“Countless people have reached out to me expressing their concern and prayers for me,” he said. It’s been really nice to see that kind of response, but it’s also incredibly overwhelming.”

Student Name: Gretchen Merman  
Grade: 10  
School: Kinkaid School  
Title: An Ever-Changing Constant  
Category: Personal Essay & Memoir  
Key: Silver Key  
Educator: Angelique Jamail

“In, and out. In, and out,” she whispers as the needle bobs and weaves in between the fabric. It is a soft, downy material, warm and well-loved, its dusty rose hue moving swiftly through my grandmother’s weathered hands. This blanket, a wounded soldier, has been with me for all of my life, just like my grandma. It was there when I was born, a slight little thing just fresh from the neonatal intensive care unit. It stayed with me always, cradled in my arms while I slept, catching my tears when I cried, and thrown into the air while I ran round my room with joy. Lovey, I called it. It could endure quite a lot, yet a few things slipped through the cracks. Every fall marked by a scratch, for every trip or stumble a small tear emerged. And so I would bring it to my grandmother, and her fingers would dance nimbly across its surface as if casting a spell. Never a strand of thread visible, she would return it to me, slightly shrunken and a little more delicate, but my Lovey just the same.

Now is one of those such occasions. A slash had been torn right through its center, quite a large hole, yet it does not bleed — for it is not human, but a relic, an ever-changing constant. It grows smaller as does my childhood, and I weep for it now in my older years. I miss those simpler years, before my life was complicated by grade school and catty girls. I wish I could go back there, never growing up, staying with my grandma forever.

My grandmother is always there to repair Lovey no matter how often I damage her. I sit on the dining room floor of my childhood home and watch with awe as her agile hands work. She sits in the hardwood chair in front of me and pulls out the fine pink string from her old sewing kit. The honey brown carpet itches slightly beneath my hands but I do not care, for I am far too entranced. The scent of her cherry blossom lotion swirls around me, sweet and mild, as she mends Lovey’s fibers, fixing my mistakes. She’s taught me everything I know about life. We’ve always had a special relationship, closer to me than my sister or brother. I was the firstborn, the first loved, the first cherished. Guiding me through every step, I soared easily through my early years with my hand in hers.

No longer fuzzy now that it has been in my possession for five years, Lovey takes on a new kind of softness — a worn comfort that soothes my ambling mind. The small silver needle shines in the sunlight, catching it in wisps through the windows on a spring afternoon. My grandma spins stories for me while she works, lips balmy with her favorite

medicated chapstick as she speaks of her own childhood, how her mother taught her to sew, and how my own mother was as a child. She captivates me, and I want to be just like her — strong and witty and talented — and I love her as much as I possibly can.

I want to sew as well, but her work is so fine and so delicate that I fear it would vanish before me if I laid a finger to it before it was secured. I have tried but failed, and I believe that the kind of patience required for sewing comes with the grace and experience that my grandma possesses. I could barely hold the fine needle in my small, chubby fingers, and my stitches followed their own nonsensical pattern. She sews in a square shape, weaving back and forth around the blanket's edges, stitching and mending, before tying off her work and cutting it with a faint snip of her scissors. Setting them gingerly back down on the dining room table, my grandma refastens the thread to her needle and begins to sew again, this time into the heart of the central tear. The thread dips and turns throughout the fabric, a lithe ballerina dancing to its own tune. As thin and frail as it is, it does not dare to break, just like my grandmother. She has seen many hardships throughout her life: divorce, poverty, working her whole life as a woman, yet she perseveres despite it all. She pulls the thread tight with a delicate upward sweep of her arm, and the baby pink string, as thin and taut as a spiderweb, cuts through the air. With a few quick movements of her wrinkled hands, her work is tied off, the tail of the thread gone without a trace.

So many memories in that blanket. It feels like a special secret between my grandma and me, our bond growing stronger as Lovey grows smaller and smaller. Someday I will grow old and no longer need it, but the memories with my grandma will still be there in my heart. My grandmother glances at me and smiles, her greenish eyes glistening with light, the early evening sun catching in her brown-and-gray speckled hair.

"What do you think?" she utters, softly.

I adore it.

Student Name: Helen Zhang

Grade: 11

School: Kinkaid School

Title: Bleeding Fields

Category: Poetry

Key: Silver Key

Educator: Angelique Jamail

Red. Red bleeds  
into the poppy  
fields of imperial  
China, and I am  
a drunken soldier  
clutching a pipe  
to my mouth like  
it is the last thing  
on earth. Breathe  
in, breathe out.  
Let the high of  
artificial insanity  
lift me into the  
current of bliss,  
because if I linger  
too long in my  
sobriety the screams  
of my comrades  
become too real  
for me to bear,

and all I can do is  
wonder why I am  
still alive when my  
hands are stained  
red by the corpses  
of better men. No,  
it is much easier to  
lose myself, to waste  
and wither away in  
a cloud of smoke  
until all my problems  
are suspended on  
the other side of  
this veil, until I am  
able to forget that  
I am me and I am  
my actions and my  
actions have  
consequences, and  
that just two hours  
ago I was laying siege  
to this land, I was  
cleaving bodies in  
half with nothing  
more than my sheer  
will. I tip my head  
back, I am embraced  
in this swath, this

kaleidoscope of color  
so intense and yet  
so muted that every  
last one of my senses  
shuts down and I am  
left suspended,  
breathing softly in this  
curious cloud of red.

Student Name: Lucas Fang  
Grade: 11  
School: Kinkaid School  
Title: Brass Courage  
Category: Poetry  
Key: Silver Key  
Educator: Angelique Jamail

My mother always envisioned me,  
Standing over there, looking splendid,  
With one hand in my pocket,  
Endraped in a black tuxedo.

In the brass embrace of a soul's curved body,  
Lies a passage to another realm of existence,  
A channel through which breath transforms,  
Into melodies that echo the heart's resonance.  
With lips pressed against the mouthpiece's edge,  
A connection is forged, a gateway opened,  
And as the first breath is drawn, the world falls away,  
Replaced by the sound, the vibration, the note.

From the depths of the instrument's bell,  
A voice emerges, raw and unfiltered,  
A voice that transcends language and time,  
A voice that carries emotions yet unspoken.  
The journey begins with the tentative touch of valves,  
Fingers dancing along their polished keys,  
Each press and release, a step into the unknown,

A map of notes that only the soul can read.

As the air flows, it transforms into sound,  
A sound that swells and soars, filling the space,  
A sound that resonates not just within the room,  
But within the chambers of the self, echoing.  
In the act of playing, a communion occurs,  
Between musician and instrument, breath and brass,  
The trumpet becomes an extension of the body,  
A conduit for thoughts, feelings, and dreams.

The music streams, a river of melody,  
Carrying with it the weight of experience,  
The highs and lows, the joys and sorrows,  
All woven into the tapestry of the composition.  
And as the notes rise and fall, a narrative unfolds,  
A story told not in words, but in vibrations,  
A story that speaks of love, loss, triumph, and longing,  
A story that speaks to the depths of the human spirit.

In the midst of the crescendos and decrescendos,  
In the midst of the trills and flourishes,  
The musician loses themselves, becomes one with the sound,  
A vessel through which emotion finds expression.  
The tempo becomes irrelevant, and the boundaries blur,  
Between the self and the music, between here and there,  
And in those moments of perfect alignment,  
There is a sense of wholeness, of unity, of finding oneself.

The trumpet's song becomes a mirror,  
Reflecting back the inner landscape of the player,  
Each measure a reflection of their innermost thoughts,  
Each phrase a journey into the heart's depths.  
And as the final sound fades into silence,  
There is a sense of fulfillment, of resolution,  
A catharsis that can only be understood,  
By those who have traversed the golden horn's windy path.

For in playing the trumpet, you unveil more than music,  
But the intricacies of your own soul,  
You discover the power to speak without words,  
To connect, to heal, and to ultimately find yourself.

Student Name: Helen Zhang  
Grade: 11  
School: Kinkaid School  
Title: Butterfly Embers  
Category: Poetry  
Key: Silver Key  
Educator: Angelique Jamail

I spread wings of ruby red embers,  
I taste your cherry lips on my parched  
tongue, I blink away drops of  
blood and pretend they are tears.  
Butterflies migrate south in the fall,  
they swarm in a mosaic of mottled  
orange against dim cerulean sky. We  
migrate south towards the ocean, we  
crawl for a future we will never have. As we  
walk, skin falls off flesh, sloughs  
off our bones, and we are decaying,  
trying to escape this endless winter,  
trying to breathe as salt and dead  
tissue flakes in waves. Shards of  
broken glass reflect light in a  
kaleidoscope of color, burrowing  
into tender muscle until each  
breath feels like my last, I am  
vomiting blood as you hold back  
strands of brittle hair from my face.  
Blood trickles down my thigh.

I catch a lock of hair  
as my flesh spills off my skull, like  
a pool of wax collecting on the frozen  
icing of my birthday cake, the night  
you kissed me for the first time.  
That night, when our shadows  
collided in a spiral of cheap beer and sour  
laughs, when your knees slammed into  
my arms with crushing purpose, I still  
don't know if I ever said yes. Blinding  
lights, driving sledgehammers into my  
eyes as I try to ease myself into this  
current of adulthood, the stars and lights  
mock each other until I want to drown  
in the staleness of your sheets, I want  
to surrender myself to you because even  
as I am falling you make me feel like I'm  
flying. Blood weeps, blood flows in  
rivers down my bones, blood drops out  
of my core as I spill myself before you.  
I want to drown in that liminal space  
between now and then, I want to wrap  
my arms around your starry neck and  
be carried like a child in the arms of  
Father Time, I want to forget that you  
are cruel and you are death and you  
make me feel like I am nothing, because  
when you smile it feels like the sun itself

stands still. What is the price of love?

Is this love?

Does love spread gossamer wings  
and take flight with a shiver of fear,  
does love saturate white bedsheets  
every morning like a sacrifice to be  
with you? You drink away my sorrows and  
vomit them up the next morning,  
glittering gold against putrid porcelain,  
you tell me you are Midas.

You are nothing but shadows and blood  
now, but I feel your presence lingering,  
soft and warm and rough in all the wrong  
ways, and everywhere you touch my body  
disintegrates into trails of crimson ashes.  
Butterflies flee south to  
live, but I crawl south to die, I offered  
everything I had for you that night  
and now I am just a husk of existence,  
a wisp of life beaten down by the unrelenting  
sun, so maybe I am dying for you.

Student Name: Sofia Barreto

Grade: 10

School: Kinkaid School

Title: Christmas Chaos

Category: Short Story

Key: Silver Key

Educator: Angelique Jamail

Christmastime. Regarded by most as a beautiful time when the skies are blue, the Peruvian weather warm, and the perfect time to exchange gifts and be with family.

“I hate Christmas.”

My friends on the call gasped, my words blasphemy to their ears.

“Okay, that was too harsh. I don’t hate Christmas; I hate Christmas parties.”

Just as they were about to protest, a loud shout came from the other side of my door, calling my name. The shrill voices, perfectly in unison, made me jump.

“SANTIIII!!”

Had it not been locked, my door would’ve burst from the number of times my cousins, Carlotta and Roberto, rammed into it.

“Oh, God—” I hung up from the call, dragging myself off my bed to open the door before it splintered.

“What do you two want?” I hissed, glaring at them.

They grinned at me, Roberto’s cheeky bright blue eyes a stark contrast to his sister’s brown ones.

“Your mom says to come downstairs to make dinner.”

He glanced into my room, eyes widening, “Wow, it’s so dark in here. Are you emo or something?”

Groaning, I slammed the door.

“I’ll be down in a minute.”

—

Stepping downstairs was like stepping into a different world: lights were strung up on the walls, fake snow spilled onto the floor, and the belén, stretching over 5 meters, was the most dramatic nativity scene known to mankind. In the background, cheesy Spanish

music blared, bachata and cumbia filling the room with a sense of celebration. Children and adults loudly clamored about whatever, giving faux compliments and filling the air with a sense of familial love and hatred.

As I trailed around the room, awkwardly avoiding the hoard of uncles perched on the couch who shouted at our TV, I crashed face-first into my mother who stood defensively in front of the kitchen door.

“¡Ay, Santi! Come in, we need help with the food. Your dad decided to ditch again, so you gotta pick it up.”

I didn’t bother replying, instead slipping into the safely-guarded and aromatic room. This happened every year, so I was used to it. Mom and Dad would plan a huge Christmas party, Dad would say he’d make the food, and then forget until the last minute so Mom would have to rally the maternal troops to cook. In a way, the routine was nice. I jerked my head over to the sound of my Aunt Daniela’s call, giving her a soft smile as I walked to where they were mass-producing food.

“Santi, how are you?” she greeted, not turning her gaze from the aji de gallina on the stove in front of her. The thick yellow mixture bubbled, teetering over the edge of the pot.

“I’m good, just tired.”

Daniela nodded, “Aren’t we all! Sorry about the twins, by the way. Roberto and Carlotta were uh—” she pointed to the kitchen table, covered in flour and raw chicken, “disastrous, so we had to throw them somewhere else.”

“It’s fine; plus, how much damage can they do in one night?”

“You’d be surprised.”

We both laughed, but a shout from my aunt, Esperanza, made us jump back into cooking.

“You two, hurry up! If the food is late again this year, I’m going to—”

I tuned out her shrieks, instead turning to my little spot on the edge of the counter, already set up by Esperanza and her die-hard perfectionism. God, she even left me instructions.

I shot a glance at Daniela, who merely shrugged back. Sixteen years of this, and somehow, every year was the same. The well-oiled machine of mothers in the kitchen sprung to life again, moving perfectly in sync. My knife sliced through the chicken, the chicken was picked up by my third aunt, Isabella, who complained about Esperanza’s constant “poor choices of seasoning” for the umpteenth time and seared on the stove. From there, it traveled around the room, bouncing from aunt to aunt until it finally reached Esperanza, who threw out anything not up to her standards and deposited the rest into the golden aji sauce.

The work became methodical, and I soon drifted off, focusing on the clamor from my uncles in the other room.

“Caramba, ¿qué haces, Camilo?” my dad swore, his voice muffled and clumsy as he questioned his brother for heaven knows what.

Camilo groaned, “Don’t judge me, Feli. You just did the same thing—”

“Yeah, but Mariano is eighteen. Esteban is ten,” my dad shot back, leaving no room for discussion.

Their conversation was cut short by my grandma, Paola. Her stone-cold voice rang through the walls, even making me shiver.

“What are you two doing?!”

I didn’t even have to be in the room to imagine the brothers’ guilty, sheepish smiles.

“I swear, if you two idiots are allowing the children to try pisco—” The distinct sound of a magazine being rolled up made me wince. Oh well, that was their problem.

My mind turned back to the kitchen, pleasantly surprised that I was almost done. Just a few more pieces to chop and I could finally go back upstairs, back into my little cozy cove of a bedroom.

“¡Casi terminamos! We only have a little left.”

I looked over to Aunt Daniela, her soft voice pushing me to finish the home stretch. In record timing, I chopped up the chicken, handing it off to Isabella, who proclaimed that she could do a better job at it. A part of me was itching to shoot back that there was a reason she had been replaced as head chef, but I stepped down. We didn’t need a repeat of two years ago. Cleaning up the spilled chicha morada and burnt ceviche had been a headache enough, but the catty remarks between Isabella and Esperanza drove half of the family crazy until we made the veto decision to replace her.

The door creaked open and in came my cousin Mariano, large platters in hand. Our gaze met, and he signaled me over, handing me a two-foot-high stack of plates.

“Santi, help me with the table?”

We were already halfway out the door when he asked, so I didn’t bother to reply. The silence between us was comfortable; we’d grown up together, and he was like a twin to me. Setting the table was a fast job, and together we finished it in five minutes. Two tables, each with thirty spots, were neatly decorated, and almost immediately filled with family members.

Quickly, I zig-zagged through relatives, hoping that no one would notice me as I sat down. On my right, my grandmothers squabbled over the newest edition of *Hola*. Antia refused to listen to Paola, dead set on the fact that Rihanna deserved her sixth time on the cover,

whereas Paola shouted back that it should've gone to Selena Gomez. Besides them, their husbands all shot each other looks of despair, my grandpa Emilio even beginning to pray for help.

My parents sat on my left, chattering away with their siblings. As more people took their spots, the bombardment of questions began.

"How's school been?" Paola asked.

"Good, pretty busy since IB tests are soon, then I need to do college stuff," I absentmindedly replied, shoveling the sour ceviche into my mouth.

"How's the boyfriend?" Emilio questioned, dipping his hands into the cancha again, fingertips covered in salt.

"Bad. He cheated and we broke up a while ago..." I washed down my sorrows and the taste of fish with a gulp of purple chicha morada, sighing.

"What was his name again? And his address?"

Time flew by, and as the younger kids all retreated upstairs to sleep, the alcohol was soon brought out for the adults. We had migrated from the dinner table to the living room, now snacking on alfajores and picarones while screaming at the soccer matches that blared from the TV. The noise clashed horribly with the music that still played; though, in a sense, it was home. I sat perched on one of the decorative chairs near the doorway, drinking from whatever glasses were offered to me. At this point, I was so tired and my mind so buzzed, I could've cared less what people said, instead drifting into my thoughts until I eventually blacked out.

—

Morning light streamed through the windows, rousing anyone who hadn't already left awake. I shifted and my back uncomfortably cracked. A blanket had been unceremoniously draped on me, probably by Mariano, who, judging by the way he was splayed across the chair across me, had also been subjected to the offers of beverages from adults.

The entire house shook as dozens upon dozens of people slowly woke, streaming out the door, finally signaling an end to the charmingly disastrous party. From where I sat near the door, still half-asleep, I waved as they departed, making false promises to "call and write you soon!"

Once the tidal wave of people slowed to mostly aunts looking for their kids, I yawned, glad to finally retire upstairs. The stairs creaked under me as I trudged to my room, cups and fake snow littering my path. Y'know, this party wasn't all that bad... Maybe I shouldn't hate Christmas parties.

Reaching out, I swung open the door to my room and froze. Everything was trashed: my computer on the floor, food on my desk, and those two little demons from earlier, grinning, asleep on my bed. I slammed the door again.

Never mind. I hate Christmas parties.

Student Name: Audrey Brown  
Grade: 12  
School: Kinkaid School  
Title: Eyes Wide Open  
Category: Personal Essay & Memoir  
Key: Silver Key  
Educator: Angelique Jamail

I don't live; I function.

Most of the time, I don't even know how I get from place to place. One second I'm throwing my backpack over my car's console into the back seat; the next I'm turning into my driveway. I've driven the same routes so many times, it's almost like I teleport from one place to the next. Whether this is a sign of expert driving or sleep deprivation is a different story.

I'm waiting for the day when I finally wake up and realize that my rhythmic patterns—as predictable as the flutter of a heartbeat or the ticking of a clock or the rising and setting of the sun—will be no more. Farewell to the days when I can turn off my alarm, stumble out of bed and into the bathroom, and locate my toothbrush all with my eyes closed, eyelids too heavy to lift after only a mere five hours of sleep. Farewell to the days when I come home to the smell of a newly-lit seasonal candle, where my mother greets me after school with a crisp, sliced Fuji apple as my sister does homework at the kitchen table nearby. Farewell to the days when the familiar creaks of our garage door signals—to human and canine family members alike—that my dad has come home from work, and our own personal “welcoming committee” prances cheerfully to the door, smiling eyes and mouths with toys ready to deliver.

Back to teleportation. Lately, I've been going to sleep Monday evening and waking up only to find that the date has already jumped to Friday's, with lots of blank space left between. Take this scenario and rinse. Wash. And, of course, repeat it. Pretty soon, the constant fog of functioning that envelops my days in a daze will need to lift before I'm left broke, having spent the rest of my time in normalcy for granted. I'm waiting for that immediately recognizable “a-ha” moment, like the strike of a lightning bolt, when I'll emerge from beneath the misty cover and see the world with fresh, clear eyes. From that moment on, I tell myself, I'll make a switch. My motivation: the fact that the comforts I'm accustomed to will soon be fading into foreign, distant memories. I'll embrace, soak up every moment. I'll stop functioning and start living.

As I'm entering this liminal chapter of my life, I'm realizing something I've taken for granted about my childhood—an era that's now coming to a close—was the ability to get away with being ignorant. Retrospectively, there were some big events that my little mind

just wasn't able to understand when I was younger. Yes, I knew that Grandmother was sick, but I never found myself asking why Dad would be gone for days on end, at a hospital or talking to lawyers or off in some far-away place called Sherman. And why Mom eventually started to leave with him, too. And why, after one trip, they came back to Houston with her dog, now "ours," and told us she couldn't come visit us in Houston anymore. I never really had to ask why, because, somewhere deep inside of me, I understood.

Now, as an eighteen-year-old "woman," I find myself being thrust into an adult world of pure, sheer knowledge that I simply don't think I belong in. A world where you can't afford to be ignorant. A world where you're supposed to know all the answers, always be right, and understand politics. A world filled with maturity and independence and self-advocacy. A world where, in a few years, there won't be anyone's hand for me to hold but my own. How can my bed be strewn with stuffed animals, yet I just cast my first vote at the election polls? I'm afraid of the dark, but, somehow, I'm about to move to a different city and live with people I don't even know exist as of my writing this? Picture a press conference: hundreds of reporters shoving cameras and microphones in your face and flashing bulbs and clicking shutters firing so rapidly they blend into a buzz reminiscent of the sound of rounds of gunfire, a sensory overload so unbelievably strong that it makes you want to just close your eyes and plug your ears and curl up into a tight little ball. This is my relationship with the idea of adulthood (although I haven't closed my eyes just yet...maybe I'll try a pair of sunglasses first?).

However, this feeling of intimidation might also very well be Richard's mindset in his final moments. He was in the midst of battle, surrounded by literal gunfire, his life on the line. At least as depicted in the movie version, Richard could have stood up to Richmond and retaliated against his advance with more than a few stray bullets, each one simply a last-ditch attempt to save face and "his kingdom" before cowardly scrambling away. Why didn't he do more with the weapon at hand? When he fired it and repeatedly missed, was it all for show? Perhaps so, because when he finally found himself cornered with nowhere to run, he couldn't muster up the courage to face his fears and the consequences that come with accountability. Richard took his own life. He'd been just functioning for too long, playing king like a child plays dress up. Eyes physically open, he plummets to his death; eyes metaphorically closed, he runs away from the mistakes he knows, full well, that he's made.

Macbeth, however, chooses to live as a child does: in ignorance. Rung after rung, step after step, he scales a figurative hierarchical ladder and hoists himself up onto the throne, with no regard for anyone but himself. The moment he fulfills his desire to become king, he believes he is truly invincible. However, although he didn't know it then, the monotones of his "tomorrow and tomorrow and tomorrow[s]" would, like Richard's, soon be coming to a close. Instead of "rinse, wash, and repeat," Macbeth and his wife seem to "kill, wash, and repeat." Or maybe not wash, but scrub. He scrubs to preserve his shining

shell, the glistening façade of a new monarch's reign; she scrubs to remove the "damned spot" of Duncan's blood that still leaves a mark on her hand, like a stubborn red wine on white linens; together, they scrub away at their already-deteriorating sanities, their power trip taking full control over their lives. Macbeth transforms from a living war hero into a functioning, corrupt monarch. If we could speak with him, he'd probably say something along the lines of "But...It wasn't supposed to happen! Birnam Wood could never come to Dunsinane!" Except, he was warned. Macbeth disregarded outside threats, even though the three Weïrd Witches told him otherwise. In some cases, ignorance might equal bliss... Well, I say his ignorance was what, ultimately, caused his downfall.

Before this class, I had never read either of these plays before, and, frankly, had no idea what to expect from either; I couldn't tell you which moments were our final ones spent with a character. Sometimes, it's the same in the real world. How are we supposed to know the last time we'll ever see someone? Do we know?

Lately, it seems people are floating in and out of my life, my inner circle of confidants dynamic and ever-evolving, like both Macbeth and Richard's (except I'm not killing those I lose). It grows bigger, then smaller, from circular to ellipsical and back. Like the giant bunches of latex balloons from grocery stores that I always get for my birthday. Some years, there are more than others; sometimes, they deflate before there's even a chance to celebrate.

Are those we lose like balloons? When we let them go, or the other way around, how high can they float before they pop

and

come

fall-

ing

right

back

down?

And, when they do fall (because, according to the Law of Gravity, what goes up must come back down), where do they land? You would hope somewhere nearby, so maybe you might be able to patch their holes, and blow them back up, and tell them you're sorry. Even if they were a little deflated, they would still be able to float. You'd hold their string short, but not too close; just so long as to maintain enough distance between you. Despite the slight distance that remains, memories of overthinking sentences and re-reading old messages and clinging to baseless fantasies would no longer plague your mind. Everything would be okay. It'd be like you'd never lost them. You would have closure. up,

Or the balloon could keep floating up far away. Rising up, up, scaling every layer of Earth's atmosphere with ease, not weighed down by a single thought or regret. Are they even thinking of me? The troposphere and stratosphere become something like distant memories, fading with the passage of time. Do they ever wonder how I'm doing? Where I am now? The balloon dances among the stars, waltzes with the plumes of blooming nebulas and foxtrots upon comets' tails. Entangled, or perhaps entranced, with a new life. Do they cling to the memories, overanalyze every interaction, re-read the texts like I do? These questions plague my mind, yet I still hold onto a piece of their razor-thin string, stretched so far it's bound to snap any second with the slightest misstep. I function to see their name pop up on my phone's home screen, "[living] for the hope of it all" like Taylor Swift says in her track, august.

We were happy. We were doing just fine! We'd spend our evenings going on walks, sharing playlists and talking of our interests. Sunsets and summer baseball, it seemed like nothing could ever go wrong. When physical distance came between us, we were still virtually inseparable, spending hours upon hours texting and calling. I was living; we were living. But, soon, the songs we once bonded over became like the tissues I used to dry my healing tears. Until then, I never understood the healing capabilities of music. I became desperate for answers, and found myself contorting lyrics' truths to give meaning to the messiness of my life. Why did it end like that? Why didn't they reply? Like Taylor, I would've "canceled plans just in case" I got a call. The call. Reminding myself of the advice my parents gave me. "No time is wasted time. Lessons can be learned from every experience, every relationship." But how can that be tru-

I pause, bringing my spiraling, orbiting mind back

down

to

Earth.

One of the nice things about gravity is that it's a given. It's grounding, despite all the "what-ifs" that come with life. While you can't control other peoples' behavior, or the

future or the perpetual “reeling” state of this chaotic “world” that we live in, you can control yourself. Your own actions, interactions, thoughts, dialogue, mentality, goals, and expectations. Do you crack under the extreme amounts of pressure you put on yourself, or give yourself grace when you know you need it? Do you let your mood be defined by others’ actions, or your own? Do you open your eyes in the face of a challenge, or do you close them in fear? Do you spend your days functioning, or do you spend them living? All these realities are choices; it’s up to you whether you take advantage of the present, or risk looking back on the past with regret. Let the weight of that notion sink in. Let it ground you, like gravity.

With that, I challenge you not to function, but to live.

Student Name: Helen Zhang  
Grade: 11  
School: Kinkaid School  
Title: Grammatical Error  
Category: Poetry  
Key: Silver Key  
Educator: Angelique Jamail

This is a run on sentence

my heart flutters like a lucid butterfly

ever-waking, translucent, iridescent

butterflies assemble in my skin,

a mosaic of blinding whites and browns and oranges and blues

fabrics restless, shifting under the twilight gloom, shifting like an ocean of tears

this is where I met you,

our unborn spirits colliding and reforging

atoms splitting, caving under pressure

as I kissed you the sky erupted in hellfire.

Our story is a run on sentence

it begins but never seems to end

the world is trapped in that liminal space between night and day

some call it twilight but I call it

the end of the world

I exist only in that sliver of air between your lips

kisses scattered, love is forever

so plunge me through the indigo cavern of midnight and carry me through dawn

my heart blossoms like a rose quivering in winter

satin white stains crimson, and I relent

even the best things must end.

This poem is a run on sentence

line breaks uneven, pauses unnecessary

commas spliced, their missing limbs scattered through the room

like meat carcasses, a butcher places

their lives on a scale and says they are worthless

(Am I worthless)

periods are like diamonds, their value is indescribable, so

you must be a period and I a comma because

why am I so expendable and you forever hold worth in your core

please, break open your pillar and share some with me.

Life is a run on sentence

it winds only to loosen

And even as you leave my life pounds on in blistering silence

I fear its end and yet ignore its continuation

organs working overtime, rest means nothing

because even one hour off would surely mean death

red tissue caramelizes into brown, then black, then nothing—

life is a run on sentence

it only takes one period to end.

Student Name: Bridget Gray

Grade: 11

School: Kinkaid School

Title: Hidden Beauties

Category: Poetry

Key: Silver Key

Educator: Angelique Jamail

“shhh,” whispers the water from below  
its appearance tries to hide  
beneath the earthy, greenery landscape  
disguising its crystal beauty of reflecting gold speckles  
the only hint of its presence  
is a low murmur of the steadily flowing stream

the sun, barely visible  
stretches her gleaming arms  
through the trees  
she calls out to me  
dancing in my eyes  
and igniting my path

a crunch from my feet cause me to  
pause.  
the bottoms of my shoes expose paint strokes  
blending fiery crimson, hazy gold, and yellow  
gracefully sweeping over the leafy green canvas  
this hidden beauty reveals itself to me

my collection of hidden beauties  
the whispering water  
the shy sun  
the little leaf  
they show more than speak  
their beauty strengthens when unseen

Student Name: Elizabeth Ajumobi  
Grade: 11  
School: Kinkaid School  
Title: I wear my dead best friend's shoes  
Category: Personal Essay & Memoir  
Key: Silver Key  
Educator: Angelique Jamail

Grief is a fickle thing sometimes. People like to say that it's a journey, that someone you cared about deeply died, and that it will take a long time to get over it. But when people pitied me and looked at me with stares, that always made everything worse. I felt like I needed to be pitied. But when no one is going through the same thing or forgets about it because "life goes on, you know?" But when does it end for me? When do I stop thinking about it? When do I stop realizing that she was the only friend I truly had? No one will ever understand me the same way she did. Sometimes I realize why people turn to drugs when they have lost a friend.

It was hard to explain the feeling that came over me after my best friend died. I felt so responsible and guilty. She was my everything, and she is gone now because of me. Everyone around me seemed so distant and unphased by it all. They continued with their lives, talking about the same things we used to talk about, but without her. It just seemed so empty and pointless without her there. I wanted to be angry at them for not understanding how I felt or mourning with me, but I couldn't blame anyone for the way they were living their lives after she died. Ultimately, I knew it was my fault—no one else's—that she was gone now and that I had to find a way to keep living despite this fact.

No. 1 Denial

Why?

Why didn't you tell me?

I had a friend who I'd call  
when I bored myself to tears.  
and then we'd talk.  
until we think  
It might just disappear.  
Then I feel sorry for myself.  
And then I remember that someone's kid is dead.

Someone's sister, someone's unrequited love, someone's rock

Someone's best friend

I tried to remind myself of all the good she brought into my life and all the joy she gave me in such a short time when we were together. I forced myself to enjoy moments, even if they weren't quite as enjoyable without her there with me. Whenever I felt like giving up on life, I would try to remember why I wanted to continue living in the first place—for her memory and out of respect for whatever little time we got together before it ended. I am a horrible friend, and I will always be. Before she died, she asked for me to make a Pinterest board of each other, which I didn't take seriously or even really try. I had noticed that she seemed distant and had been for the past month. She was in to theater and had to do plays, which I know were stressful, but she loved it. I had gone and found another group of friends, but we would still try to FaceTime each other. But soon enough, I had a feeling we had grown apart in a way we both felt.

The tears that I shed that day would fill a river, one the size of which you see in postcards from faraway places with stunning scenery on their covers. It was odd how something so small could hold so much water. Now I know why everyone seems to believe in what happens in the afterlife—that we're all still conscious states of beings living in a utopian world or dimension different from ours with a deity living among us. Some believe that when you die, you come back to this same world as someone new and don't remember anyone who ever lived here before them, like it was a fresh start. A mythology for those who want the eternal happiness they couldn't find while living this life. I believe in nothingness. There is no existence outside of death, and there will never be another experience for our souls ever again afterward, no consciousness on any plane of reality, or anything similar to what we perceive as an afterlife.

I understand why some people find the thought of life after death terrifying, knowing that none of what lies beyond applies to us anymore. But nothing about it is comforting when you think about it. Life is so fleeting, passing by in a flurry of emotions—from worry and sadness to happiness and joy—and no one can slow it down. When we die, we just drift off into eternal slumber, with our brains ceasing to function; sight and sound become unfamiliar concepts. Despite this morbidity, it seems alright to me.

As the anniversary of her death approaches, sometimes I think about that day. That day, school seemed like a regular thing, like always. I had emailed my teacher about meeting in her room to do some geometry homework. I had my natural hair out and decided against doing a puff in fear it would hurt my head. Chloe loved my natural hair in a puff, so even though it felt like we were at a distance because of school and it was close to midterms, I had made sure that I packed a comb and a rubber band if Chloe said I did. I came to school feeling a bit weird, like there was an instinct that something bad was coming, like the ones people talk about in the movies we all watch.

I constantly berate myself for not being there to help my friend. My mind won't let me forget that "your best friend is gone." "Why are you laughing? Your best friend died," and "You have the same friends that took your best friend away from you—how can you be such a bad person?" My therapist said it wasn't my fault, and I had no way of knowing what would happen. I understand her logic, but it's hard to think clearly when I'm the only one she can talk to about important matters.

I miss her a lot. It's more of an unspoken feeling that is hard to describe without telling my entire life story and then getting to the part where she is included. She had such a big impact on my life and well-being that I will always be grateful and know that my soulmate left this world far too soon.

### No. 2 Anger

Did you know you can be mad and completely disgusted at food?

Did you know I look good at funerals?

Did you know that after I cry and my soul feels like it has been stomped, kicked, and spitted on, I look good?

Did you know I yelled at my mom for the first time, and she forgave me?

Wouldn't it be nice if you didn't have to think about someone after they left?

I miss you more than anything.

Her funeral was the first time I had seen a dead body in a casket. I remember buying her a necklace with a dinosaur on it. I brought it and put it in her hands, then wailed once I let go. With my mom trying to calm me down, all I could think of was that her hands were cold and her fingers were brittle and weak. They accepted my grasp, but they were not the same hands I had seen and held years before. It was as if the universe was giving me a frozen hand to hold for a moment, and it would soon disappear.

### No.3 Bargaining

I just want to feel okay.

No, I wish it wasn't true.

Give me a year or two.

To think of what to do without you

I know no one will come and save me.

I've done the best I can without you.

A flame that I can't be next to and feel your warmth

It's been too long since I heard that laugh of yours.

Your gravestone feels so cold. I put a stuffed animal to help with the cold.

I hope it feels alright in there.

Sometimes I wonder if she's still here or if she has gone beyond this plane of existence. Even though I don't believe in an afterlife, I wish there was something else so that she could experience some kind of peace after death.

I can't help but feel guilty for not being able to provide her with the support she needs in life. If only I had been there when things were tough—maybe I could have helped her somehow. All those nights spent talking on the phone, laughing together, all those promises made—it makes me sad knowing none of it mattered in the end.

But then again, maybe it was for the best that she left us before any more pain could come her way, before any more heartache, anger, or sadness could grow inside her heart. There is nothing worse than hurting someone you care about deeply and not being able to make them feel better or protect them from all harm. So maybe this was just one way of protecting her from further hurt—an escape from a cruel world that did not treat her kindly at times.

No. 4: Drifting Away/Two Slow Dancers

Nobody notices anymore.

Am I supposed to be like them?

And when do I forget?

Why does it feel like I should put my head underwater?

My brain doesn't remember if yesterday was a year ago.

Or if a year ago was yesterday

Sometimes I don't remember her face.

So I look at the pictures of us and of when I felt so young and happy.

And I want us back.

And it would be a hundred times easier.

But would it be?

With your demons and pains that were choking you and filling your senses with something that couldn't be fixed,

I'm sorry that I didn't listen to you.

I listen to your voicemails on repeat at night, trying to hear

If, through the cracks in your voice, there was some sign  
I should've seen, I should've known, and I should've asked.

She's not in pain anymore. That's all I could ask for.

No one should ever have to leave this world at such a young age without having experienced real love—true love—the kind we all deserve, no matter how many mistakes we make throughout our lives. Chloe taught me this lesson, and it's something I will carry with me until the day I die—that we should never take any opportunity at true happiness for granted because life is too short and death is far too inevitable for us.

No. 5: The Acceptance of a Broken Heart

Clutch my heart in your cold hands and squeeze until no fluid is left.

Claw my skin to feel

Scar me just to feel real.

What does it take to feel happy again?

What does it take to find love like that again?

“Put your dirty shoes in my washing machine heart, baby; bang it up inside.”

I'm not wearing my usual lipstick; I thought maybe we could kiss tonight.

I can't find you.

I cried for a long time.

She is dead but gone.

Never gone

Student Name: Anna Consoli

Grade: 11

School: Kinkaid School

Title: Light a Candle

Category: Poetry

Key: Silver Key

Educator: Angelique Jamail

[Verse 1]

You once told me

Ignore what's in your mind

But now you're all I think about

And I can't leave you behind

I try to slow down

I try to feel each heartbeat

But my mind it goes numb

Like cold to the heat

[Pre-chorus]

Fire burns in my head

Until I am aflame

I'm left sitting in the ashes

No one else to blame

When the voices get too loud

And I can barely breath

I need something to ignite me

I need something to believe

[Chorus]

They told me, "light a candle"  
And let it all go  
But I think I'll be here forever  
Drowning in the smoke

[Verse 2]

I'm taking medication  
To feel something or nothing  
Because lately seeing you  
Is all I've been wanting  
I don't think I know how  
To live a life in peace  
I find the chaos in the silence  
And the danger in the weak

[Pre-Chorus]

Fire burns in my head  
Until I am aflame  
I'm left sitting in the ashes  
No one else to blame  
When the voices get too loud  
And I can barely breath  
I need something to ignite me  
Something to believe

[Chorus]

They told me to light a candle  
And let it all go

But I'll be here forever  
Drowning in the smoke

[Bridge]

Oh, if I fall into a  
downward spiral  
Don't try and save me  
I'll stay here a little while  
No, don't let yourself  
get swept up in my current  
Oh, this fear you don't deserve it  
This grief, you didn't earn it

[Chorus]

So, go ahead and light a candle  
And let it all go  
You can leave me behind  
Drowning in the smoke

Student Name: Helen Zhang  
Grade: 11  
School: Kinkaid School  
Title: Looking for Home  
Category: Poetry  
Key: Silver Key  
Educator: Angelique Jamail

Unite

the broken halves of my forgotten heritage,  
paint my tongue silver until it dances  
through the lissome limbs of my ancestors, make  
me whole again with the promise of belonging and love.

State

my name, I want to hear my Asian glory magnified  
off the gleaming white of your untouched streets,  
I want to smear jaundiced paint onto ivory walls  
and see it blaze gold, state my name and tell me I am Midas.

America,

she is mine and I hers, and when day dulls to night  
like a forgotten bruise I fall into her starry embrace, I count  
every beaming spark on her endless bosom and pool  
them in my palms like liquid fire.  
Dawn bleeds into being in a spiral of crimson and alabaster,  
I fall out of her embrace and land in America, my home, my world.

United States of America, fifty stars drifting alone in the cosmos, but these stars cannot possibly be united because they burn brown, black, white rises up in a blinding flash to swallow each spark in dazzling flame, the world is cleansed of imperfection.

United States of America, lines of blood stain slate gray streets as this country tears itself apart, red clashes with blue, white with black, we live in a world imploding into plumes of crimson ash.

United States of America, a home for those lost, those searching, those found. A home built on broken lives and not quite fulfilled hope, a home built on the backs of those seeking meaning, an ocean of my grandmother's tears and my father's stale wishes, a place where I can finally dream.

A place with a promise.

Student Name: Elizabeth Koo  
Grade: 8  
School: Kinkaid School  
Title: Marianna Fan Club  
Category: Humor  
Key: Silver Key  
Educator: Angelique Jamail

Marianna Fan Club!

Our noble purpose is to research and to support Marianna Rossi in her time of need as it is our duty as respectable citizens of the school. We are not racist, ableist, elitist, or climate change skeptics. We will accept ANYONE who is willing to commit to our club. Please join! We meet in Room 141 at 2 to 3 pm to share our research results.

President/Founder: Victoria Dune

Vice President: Min Lee

Secretary/Scribe: Sue Addams

Members: Gigi Parrish, Akaash Singh...

Sponsor: Mr. Winkles (the 6th grade English teacher)

Activities we will do (not in order):

- Stalking
- Stealing (we return all objects)
- Kung-fu
- Vandalizing

NOTE: On the first meeting, we will provide sugar cookies (this is not INTENTIONAL bribery, so it does not break the school rules against bribery).

NOTE 2: PLEASE COME (Mr. Winkles says that if we don't have more than five members, he'll stop sponsoring our club).

NOTE 3: Speak VERY loudly to Mr. Winkles. Mr. Winkles is almost deaf (the first time we suggested starting the Mariana Fan Club, he thought we said 'Marie Curie Club,' which is the stupidest idea I've ever heard of).

Report 1–October 22, 2023

It was two in the afternoon. The president, vice president, and secretary (me) had all come 10 minutes early, but none of the lower-ranking officials had arrived yet. Mr. Winkles wasn't there either. He was at a faculty meeting. Tori, the president, said that we'd have to start without them.

Or, as she really said, "Suckers can lose their education, anyways." I put it in for the sake of accuracy, not accordance.

Anyways, we chat a little about the nuts and bolts at our first meeting.

1. Our motto is in Latin because, of course, all mottos should be in Latin. It's Vive La Marinara! I told Tori that Min couldn't spell "Vive la Marianna" to save her life, but Tori was too distracted finding photos of Marianna in last year's yearbook.
2. We decided on a very democratic system, here, at Marianna Fan Club. Tori will suggest a plan, and Min and I can nod at it, which confirms we agree to Tori's plan. At least...I think that's how it works. The decision of our system was more or less tacit.
3. We each took a pin, struck a part of our hand, and did a blood oath to always follow the purpose of the Marianna Fan Club. The oath goes like this: I will always put the will of Marianna Rossi, daughter of Lucia Rossi, first. It was painful but worth it. I am now an official member!

Report 2–October 24, 2023

We ate sugar cookies because Min forgot them last meeting. Gigi showed up temporarily to snag a cookie, but we wouldn't let her eat one without doing a blood oath. She got freaked out about it and ran away. Tori got angry about that.

"Can't endure a little prick, can she?" Tori said. Tori can be vulgar sometimes.

Anyways, after Gigi left, Tori, Min, and I swapped rumors that we had heard about Marianna.

1. “..danced in Lady N’s 2023 music video, XYX...”
2. “Her earrings are real diamond, not cubic zirconia.”
3. “Wore a Versace jacket to school yesterday...”

Honestly, I didn’t find anything we filed that day particularly exciting.

Report 3–October 25, 2023

“I had a breakthrough today,” Tori announced as soon as I walked in. “Number 1: since neither Gigi, nor Akaash, nor Ginny have shown up to our meetings yet, I rule them traitors to the Marianna Fan Club. From now on, we no longer associate with them.” Min and I nodded.

“Number 2,” she said, “I saw Marianna do something strange in her locker today...fumbled around longer than she should to pull out a gym shirt...”

“We should watch her closely at the gym tomorrow,” suggested Min.

“Yeah,” said Tori, “Sue, you get the left side view. Min, you get the right. I’ll get the one in front. Okay?” Min and I nodded. It was a plan.

Report 4–October 26, 2023

“I tried to watch Marianna über closely,” confessed Min, five minutes into our meeting, “But I didn’t want to seem like a creep in the girl’s locker room.”

“I understand.” Tori looked very seriously at Min. “However, you made the blood oath, Min. And in making your blood oath, you are to put Marianna first—even before your pride.”

“Sorry,” Min looked down and was about to cry.

“Don’t say sorry to me,” snapped Tori. “Say sorry to Marianna Rossi.”

“I’ll sneak a gift basket in her locker tomorrow,” promised Min. “It’ll have mini cinnamon rolls, orange scented shampoo, bunny erasers—it’ll cost three months of allowance.”

“Okay,” Tori nodded. “Did you watch Marianna, Sue?”

I gulped even though I didn't need to gulp. "Yeah, she uses Chanel perfume."

"Really?" Tori's head snapped up, "I didn't get a good enough look to see that it was Chanel."

"Yeah. Eau de Parfum. That's why she smells so good all the time."

"But that doesn't make sense," Tori muttered darkly. "Our recent observations on Marianna this summer led us to the conclusion that she is 5% likely to fall victim to vanity."

"Well that's what I saw."

"Let's look again."

Report 5–October 27, 2023

"I can't believe it!"

"Neither can I!"

"It's an outrage! I bet even the gossip lines are going haywire as we speak!"

We raved for about thirty minutes before Min finally settled down and asked an intelligent question.

"What do you think Bear Evans meant, pulling Marianna out of the locker room like that? She looked so embarrassed!"

"Probably just trying to threaten her," declared Tori. "I mean, why else?" There was silence for a couple of seconds.

"Actually, that makes so much sense," said Min, "Marianna Rossi was so pure...so perfect. I bet Bear has something against her." Her eyes narrowed. So did Tori's.

"Tomorrow, we go to Bear's locker and find out for ourselves," growled Tori, "Remember the notes we took from Spy Kids and keep quiet when we get there."

"I don't have a boy's uniform," I said.

"Come over to my house, and I'll give you my brother's," Min replied.

Marianna had always had our backs from the start: she let Tori cheat off her history test, brought Min to the nurse after Min had knocked out a tooth, and gave me water at soccer practice when I thought I'd died. In our most desperate times, she had saved us. Now we were going to save her.

To: amara.dune@123gmail.com  
From: lauren.fischer@cunnigham.org  
Subject: MISBEHAVIOR IN THE LOCKER ROOMS

Dear Ms. Dune,

This is Lauren Fischer from the Athletics Department. I would like to report to you that we found your daughter, Victoria Dune, in the boy's locker room with Min Lee and Sue Addams. The girls were wearing newsboy caps and school boy uniforms. Let's just say, they were caught in a matter of seconds.

I would just like to make it clear that under no circumstances should a girl be wandering around in a boy's locker room. Particularly, as your daughter explains it, "To infiltrate the enemy's forces for the pursuit of justice. Vive la Marinara!"

I had to give the girls a warning, but if this accident continues, I will have to suspend them from athletics. We need to protect our students' privacy.

Thank you for understanding.

Sincerely,

Lauren Fischer (she/her)

Report 6–November 1, 2023

"I don't get it," Tori fumed. "We should petition to fire Ms. Fischer."

"Yeah," Min sighed. "We were only trying to protect Marianna from scum like Bear Evans."

"Yeah," I added on helpfully.

"I am proud of what I did!" Tori was still red and white with anger. "I may have gotten detention and about five scoldings in one day by idiots, but I did it for a noble cause!"

"Me too," said Min, stroking Tori's arm to calm her.

"Me three," I stroked Tori's other arm. She slowly regained her composure.

"Yes," she said after a minute or two, "We did find out that Bear Evans is scum. We even have proof of it too!"

Min fumbled around with Mr. Winkles' Promethean Board, and soon we were watching our results with big, self-satisfied grins on our faces. Take that Ms. Fischer!

VIDEO—October 27, 2023 by Tori's Apple Phone 12

(Marianna Rossi is dragged out of the locker room by Bear Evans)

MARIANNA: What do you want?

BEAR: You know what I want.

MARIANNA: Mentos? Money?

BEAR: Of course.

MARIANNA: (laughs) Well, I don't have money, boy. Back off.

BEAR: Please. I forgot it. I need to eat lunch.

MARIANNA: Uh...(shakes her head)

BEAR: If you don't, I'll—I'll...I'll starve!

MARIANNA: Fine. You better pay me back.

BEAR: When have I not?

MARIANNA: Actually? That's—

(Marianna Rossi stalks away from Bear Evans)

VIDEO ENDS

The Crime Column from The Cunning Ham (a student-made magazine)

On Tuesday, November 3, 2023, vandalism was found in three middle school girl bathrooms. All the vandalism was graffiti ranging from "Bear Evans is scum" to "Vive la Marinara!" Personally, I'm mostly confused about why 'they' added the marinara part.

I said 'they' because the culprit(s) of the graffiti have not been discovered. We obviously don't put cameras in the girls' bathroom. Most likely, the culprits went inside the bathroom during a busy time like athletics, skipped class, and did the graffiti before the seventh graders came in. (Below, I've attached a list of suspects who skipped class yesterday).

The bigger question is who could have beef with Bear Evans, anyways? Bear Evans is the current class president of the eighth grade. His catchphrase is "love ya" with a wink, which is, by the way, a great catchphrase. 1 out of 2 girls in middle school have a crush on him.

The culprit will face major consequences, according to the head of the school. Consequences like suspension because not only is vandalism of the school property against E.L. Cunningham's core values, but also because the culprits used PERMANENT MARKER. If you, reader, ever do vandalism, DO NOT use a permanent marker. The janitors are still freaking out about the fact that even Mr. Clean doesn't work on this marker.

In conclusion, that's the crime column for y'all. Have a nice homecoming!

Over and out,

Lilly Roberts

Suspects:

1. David Martinez
2. Liam Eaton
3. Pasphaë Mitchell
4. Tori Dune
5. Min Lee
6. Sue Addams

Report 7–November 10, 2023

We couldn't meet for a while because Mr. Winkles said he couldn't host us. He was going out of town—to New Orleans—for a conference and left his classroom locked. Tori tried to ax kick the door open, but she was wearing dress shoes. Her toes had to be bandaged after that.

I suggested we find a more reliable sponsor to host our club, but Ms. Limpy, the other sixth grade English teacher, said that all the sponsors had other clubs to take care of. Stupid clubs if you ask me. Who cares about the Environmental Club and global warming when you have Marianna Rossi? Right?

Anyways, we started our meeting thirty minutes early by skipping out of athletics. (Tori had bruised toes, Min had a concussion, and I had a bad “headache.” None of us could participate).

Now Min stood at the front of the Promethean Board, tapping a toe impatiently, waiting for Tori to come in. Tori came in.

“Greatest news!” Min finally cried out just as Tori shouted, “My feet hurt!”

Min rolled her eyes.

“Well if you don’t want to open this with me,” she said, holding up a composition notebook with white seashells and orange starfishes on its cover, “I’ll open it—”

“OMG!” Tori shrieked. She starts pawing at the journal, “How’d you get it?”

“Yeah, how?” I stepped forward and started flipping through its pages, scanning a few words here and there.

Min smiled and tapped her lip with a finger, “O-o-oh, I don’t know—”

“Tell me!” demanded Tori, trying to get a look at the journal.

“Please, Min,” I added.

“You know how Marianna was sick from the flu yesterday?”

“You snuck into her locker and took the journal. Oh! I’m so glad we learned Marianna’s locker combo!”

“Exactly!”

“That’s so genius,” Tori danced around.

“But we better return it by tomorrow,” Min said pointedly, “Or she’ll notice we stole it.”

“It’s fine,” Tori mucked a hand. “I think you should bring sugar cookies as a celebration.”

“I’ll think about it.”

“Now let’s look at that journal,” shouted Tori, “How’s it going, Sue?”

“Uh,” I said, uncertainly. “Okay...”

“Gimme!”

I gave Tori the journal. She flipped through it for a couple seconds. Her face became paler and paler by each second. Paper white to snow white to translucent. Then, she burst into tears.

"OMG," wailed Tori, "These definitely look like Mrs. Rossi. Big eyes. Curly hair. Definitely."

"Are you sure?" Min gently took the journal from Tori and flipped through it, "Oh, wow...wow!"

I grab a tissue box. We spend the rest of the thirty minutes crying our faces off. Because as rumor has it, Mrs. Rossi died from cancer.

Report 8–November 11, 2023

"So guys," I said, "I returned the journal."

"Good for you," Min replied dully, "I bought sugar cookies." Her eyes are still puffy from yesterday.

"Yay!" Tori cheered. She did a spinning hoof kick in the air. Min laughed. I smiled. Just like that, the Marianna Fan Club regained its morale.

Report 9–November 12-22

My hand got tired, so I made a list of information we've gathered over Marianna.

1. Uses Vogt Hairspray (Min tried Vogt Hairspray and ended up with frizzy curls. Conclusion: Marianna has special hair).
2. Most recent eraser is shaped like a turkey (Min, Tori, and I have decided to go fall shopping ASAP)
3. Bad habit: chewing her nails (I'm wearing nail polish, so I can't chew my nails. Tori chewed her nails to bits).
4. The name Marianna means star of the sea (All "Sue" means is lily—a dumb, old flower)

VIDEO–November 25, 2023 on Sue Addams's Android 10

WARNING: BATTERY IS AT 5%!!

KANG LEE passes something to MARIANNA. The camera zooms in. The 'something' is a white, oval shaped object. MARIANNA gives him a buck. Someone touches the camera lens.

VOICE: No phones out of your lockers!

VIDEO ENDS

Report 10–November 26

"Marianna wouldn't."

"She could..."

"No!" Tori was insistent.

"Face the truth," said Min dejectedly, "Marianna is using drugs. Perhaps after her mother died or something."

"And you think Kang is her drug dealer? Kang is nice—"

"There is hard video evidence against what you just said."

Min leaned back.

"I'm sorry, Tori, but that's just the way things are."

And with that—oh! Tori said I can't record anything else in here. We don't want evidence against us for what we're about to do. But all I will say is it is for a noble cause.

Those were our intentions.

TEXAS CHILDREN'S HOSPITAL RECORDS—November 27, 2023

Patient: Kang Lee

Physician: Dr. Danny Young

Analysis: The patient slipped on water before being repeatedly kicked in the shin. No serious damage done but a slight fracture. The patient will be excused from athletics for the next month.

To: cheryl.addams@11gmail.com

From: keven.laurence@cuningham.org

Dear Ms. Addams,

I'm sorry to inform you that your daughter, Sue Addams, has been suspended from the school alongside Victoria Dune and Min Lee.

It was reported by Linley Hoofman and Isabella Garcia (as well as multiple other witnesses) that the girls had collaborated to attack a fellow eighth grader, Kang Lee, by kicking him in the shin repeatedly.

It is school law that under no circumstances can violence be tolerated at our establishment. Instead, I suggest that your daughter manage her anger issues by seeing our wonderful school counselor.

Thank you for understanding.

Sincerely,

Principal Laurence

Report 11–December 12, 2023

We've just come back from suspension, and Mr. Winkles has declared he's no longer sponsoring our club. He said the principal wouldn't let him. Honestly, I understand. The principal is a completely unreasonable person. Tori and Min tried to explain to him what had happened, but Principal Laurence wouldn't listen to anything we said. What a tyrant!

We've agreed that we won't let the tyrant bully us. We will continue our club though we haven't found an exact time to meet. Min has yoga every Wednesday. Tori has karate every Tuesday. And I have English tutoring every other day.

But, against all odds, we will prevail! Even in the face of death! Vive la Marinara!

About Me (submit at the end of class)

Name: Marianna Rossi

Age: 13, going on 14

Hobbies: Drawing. I like to draw random people in my journal from time to time.

Favorite candy: Mentos. Sometimes my friend, Kang, sells Mentos to me.

Favorite subject in school: History

Things my classmates know about me: My boyfriend is Bear Evans.

Things I'd like my classmates to learn about me: My mother had cancer when I was three years old. That's correct. But the rumor that she died from cancer...that's wrong. She's alive. She can still cook pasta and dance and play the piano. So, whoever left casseroles on my doorstep...forget about it!!

Student Name: Abby Shi  
Grade: 11  
School: Kinkaid School  
Title: My Love for Yeye  
Category: Personal Essay & Memoir  
Key: Silver Key  
Educator: Angelique Jamail

### My Love for Yeye

At five years old, my curious eyes observed Yeye (Grandpa) studying for the United States citizenship test. I saw him carefully write notes in the margin of an old tattered magazine with crinkly pages because he would never throw anything away. He used a scratched-up, fifty-cent, inky black pen that smeared on the pages and stained his calloused hands. I waddled over to sit on his lap and noticed his notes were in broken English, and that I actually understood his writing. These notes focused on American history and government; even at five years old, I understood that something important was troubling him. I immediately offered help to Yeye and he took me up on it.

Within a few days, he appeared with a makeshift voice recorder. The voice recorder was palm-sized and bound in silver duct tape, colorful stray wires protruding from the sides. The battery exposed on the back end shone in silver and red. I marveled at his creation. He used this humble device to capture my American pronunciation in English. He attentively listened to my voice over and over again, trying to mimic my perfect accent. Exhausted from quizzing him, I would often become drowsy. Yeye would notice my weariness and stop the duct-taped recorder. He carried me with his sturdy arms and rocked me to sleep while playing recordings of his voice singing on that same recorder. His comforting and gentle lullaby, sung out of love and sacrifice soothed me. After cradling me for forty-five minutes, I could feel his perspiration and tiredness. I had feelings then that I had no words for as a five-year-old. I didn't understand what the word gratitude meant, but this was what I was feeling in my heart. I felt so much gratitude because he sacrificed his comfort for me. This is the first time I can remember feeling loved. Eventually, in my life, my grandparents passed their citizenship test and became close caretakers as my parents built their careers in America.

My close relationship with Yeye continued throughout my childhood, motivating me to make him proud for being a good person. He helped me understand the value of sacrifice. His actions affected me well beyond my childhood as I came to understand the meaning of the word "gratitude" over the years. I learned from Yeye to help others even when they don't request help. There are times when I still recall the pure happiness I felt while Yeye carried me back and forth past the leather-brown couches positioned against

the long-ended wall of our living room. These were the last moments when I didn't have a single worry in the world. It is surprising how this experience is etched so deeply in my memory. I don't remember anything but this, from our time in this first house.

The treasured recollection of Yeye's unwavering devotion stays with me now as I approach adulthood. I realize I will be without the daily support of my family for the first time. It is not clear to me now how I will mature without the comforts of home. That old beat-up recorder sits in the kitchen cupboard behind my mom's Chinese vases and teacups. I think about burying the recorder in my luggage so Yeye's voice will travel along with me. When I think about leaving home for college, I carry him with me in my mind and heart for remembrance of safety and love.

Student Name: Anna Nguyen  
Grade: 8  
School: Kinkaid School  
Title: My Mother's Musical Embrace  
Category: Poetry  
Key: Silver Key  
Educator: Angelique Jamail

Atop the stairs,  
I lost myself in my mom's ballad as she played the piano,  
Sheltered by only the walls of our house from the chilly, inky night.  
She thought I was asleep,  
But I was roaming through the gloomy upstairs halls  
When I heard music echoing from the living room.

Enchanting notes whirled up the stairs,  
Rolling into my ears  
As placidity overtook my alert body.  
She swayed back and forth like tall grass in the wind,  
Swinging with the leisurely and tranquil rhythm of the piece.  
They danced across the white and black piano keys  
Like ballerinas in the Nutcracker.  
Care and love laced around her fingers like silk,  
Weaving into the captivating notes  
And painting the starry night.

Her song could pacify the wildest of storms  
And the most feral of creatures.  
My eyelids dropped in peaceful surrender

As her song rocked me in its musical arms.

On the wooden stairs,

I listened to my mom play piano

In the room overflowing with affection.

She thought I was asleep in my room,

But I was dozing off by the icy, rusty black rails of the stairs

In the warm embrace of her song.

Student Name: Caroline Pielop

Grade: 11

School: Kinkaid School

Title: nature; by design

Category: Poetry

Key: Silver Key

Educator: Angelique Jamail

let alien beings walk among you  
ants and stickbugs  
guide them up your legs  
they will massage your weary spine  
or sting the knots out of your system.

but my mother's rub and prick came first,  
she asserts.

conduct the swallows and mourning dove  
tense  
release, you melody of birdsong.  
take your turns bringing light to my piece  
balance, harmony of brook, bubble along  
and dance to the same song as the deep whistling trees

yet how could they copy the greats, cheating beethovens?  
take the notes i know for yourselves.

tell the squirrels to scamper about,  
train them to chase their tails,

rush a moment of fast paced bliss.

my brother watches people wrestle online.  
these creatures are more invigorated in play  
but how could a lesser creature come first?

declare a revelation, in all your conditioned glory  
nature echoes the beauties we have created!

but how then could the river call my name  
to sink into her beautiful mist?

will the woodpeckers carve my path  
to a home beyond the bayou?

i cannot bend my words into the shape of the golden ratio,  
only my oldest mother can do it for me.

Student Name: Lucas Fang  
Grade: 11  
School: Kinkaid School  
Title: Niu Rou Mian  
Category: Poetry  
Key: Silver Key  
Educator: Angelique Jamail

To speak in our mother tongue  
Is to speak only partially in Taiwanese,  
But entirely in war.

Knowing without touching  
Is like kissing without loving  
If nothing lasts forever,  
Then I'm writing to you from the voice  
Of an endangered species.

Too much joy is lost in its desperation to keep it.  
When does our suffering end?  
When can my lips sing your name  
And have it mean only your name,  
And not the things you left behind?

Our recollection of the midsummer's eve  
Unassuming faces reflecting the rays  
From the crimson sunset  
Until the evangelical starlight embraces the night sky  
Listening to promises we made to each other...

Promises that would not be kept  
By the time the leaves have fallen  
And the naked branches could no longer hide  
The truth that you meant to say.

You left without a trace  
And recur as a face,  
A face I can see  
But a face I could not erase.

The curdling broth  
Thinly-laced love bathing in the incessant pool  
Washing down the battle-worn edges  
Of our steamy throats.  
A hazy shades of emotions,  
Swollen inside with forgotten memories  
Swept away by the river beneath.

They say that nothing can last forever  
But they're just scared it will last longer  
Than they can love it.  
And perhaps it is the saddest thing ever —  
A comma that's forced to become a period.  
Because the sunsets, like fireflies,  
Exist only on the verge of their own disappearing.  
To be beautiful, you must be seen.  
To be loved, you must prepare for love to leave.

Suddenly, I find myself enveloped  
By the glimmer of your memories  
Hoping to be carried away by the river —  
But my feet are cement  
As your scent helplessly fades from my consciousness.

Now I try to remember you  
For longer than I have known you.

\*\*\*\*

I miss you more than I remember you.

Student Name: Emma Baird  
Grade: 12  
School: Kinkaid School  
Title: Out of Orbit  
Category: Science Fiction & Fantasy  
Key: Silver Key  
Educator: Angelique Jamail

“November 6th, 2083. The Meridian spacecraft has now reached 810,326 kilometers outside of earth’s atmosphere. We remain stranded with no fuel, but are conserving energy and food. We have enough supplies to last us at least another two weeks, and more if we ration further. If we can properly calculate the fuel used to get this far, we will report for rescue. Over.”

The red recording light went dark, and the wall monitor blinked to confirm it had saved the audio. In minutes the log would be transmitted back to ground control in a futile attempt to keep up a normal routine. The machines’ beeps bounced around the metal prison, mocking each second of wasted time. Captain Caiyun Fu, age thirty-eight, stood at the controls and curled her fingers around the edge with a determined grip. Her fingernails were neatly cut, past bite marks faded away. Their tapping hit the surface in unison with the sound of footsteps approaching. She sucked in a breath, tightened her lips into a serious line, and turned as crew members entered the navigation station.

The two young adults laughed as they entered, but stress pulled at their faces in small ways– the slightest of frowns and eye bags. The taller one, Helena Fynn, brushed a wandering bleached braid from her face and avoided looking at the monitors behind the captain. Her friend Nate Hersh, on the other hand, stiffened and adopted a serious look. A hint of mustache snuck out from under his nose.

“Helena, Nate, keep an eye out for anything interesting outside the observation deck,” Caiyun commanded at once, her voice never shaking. “This may have started as a distance and fuel mission, but we can still collect data.”

“Yes, Captain.” Nate nodded and squared his shoulders, but Helena impatiently tapped her foot. Caiyun relieved a sigh as they exited, then turned back to the screen.



Manuel Navas, the sixteen-year-old engineer, fiddled and leaned against a side panel in the hallway. Approaching fortified boots made hollow clunking sounds that filled the

entire space. The noise blended with the buzzing and beeping, another piece of fauna among the wire trees. He spared a small glance up to see Helena and Nate, then turned his focus back to his work. His tongue snuck out from between his teeth as he fished for a tool from his pockets. Their uniforms were geometric and fitted, but still carried some bulk padding and compartments from past designs. The thick, typical astronaut suit was only to be worn out in space. Luckily, the collar housed an easily deployable helmet in case of emergency. Despite the newer developments, the boots remained clunky. The telltale sound of boots grew louder, and Manuel remembered his companions; however, he didn't remember to move in time. Nate's knee caught on Manuel's shoulder, causing him to pitch forward.

"What the—"

After he regained balance, both he and Helena looked down to see the engineer, who returned the gaze with wide eyes. Nervously, he slid an electrical tester that had been in the middle of the hallway closer to himself. "Sorry 'bout that," he tried to laugh, but the warmth froze from the chilly reception. His friendly grin never wavered. "On your way to see the stars? That's cool!"

Nate and Helena shared a flat look. "Yeah, kid. It's whatever," Helena responded with a shrug, then kept moving. Nate followed right after, the pair's familiarity evident and close knit, but too tight to enter. Manuel leaned his head against the wall, embracing the cool metal. Not even the metallic thump could fill the silence.

Everything was quiet—too quiet. The stars never spoke and the planets held no visitors. Manuel tried many times to eavesdrop on the captain's logs, but she always switched the door into sound-canceling mode. He had memorized every molecule of that door as he sat outside it, not saying a word. The words built up inside of him, a bubbling bathtub daring to overflow, held back by surface tension. From the observation deck down the hall, he heard conversation. It was few and far between, but always friendly.

Manuel wondered what it'd be like to join.

He retrieved the electrical tester from under his leg, stuck out of the way as always. He situated the metal probe against the sockets and cable clamps. The sensor read twenty-four volts, and Manuel clicked his tongue against his teeth curiously. "It was higher last time..." he wondered out loud.

Uncertainty curled around his stomach, a vicious snake waiting to strike. He took deep breaths, imagining his dad's hand on his shoulder and his papa's voice. It's fine, he thought to himself. If I can skip grades then I can get home. This is my thing.

"Helena! On the left!" Nate cried out from down the hall.

Manuel jumped to his feet just as Caiyun entered the hallway in a rush. The kid followed her, tools abandoned. "There's no use, anyways!" Helena's voice rang. Caiyun and

Manuel were pushed aside by her as they reached the doorway. Helena's stomps thudded along the ground, the last view of her face brimming with stress. In the observation deck, Nate stood frozen where Helena had run off.

"Captain, I- there was a solar flare and she missed it, a-and I got mad so she said we might as well give up, and..."

Caiyun noticeably tensed, lowering her shoulders and standing taller. She sighed and plastered on an assured smile. "She's just on edge, don't worry. We will get home."

Manuel leaned forward and tried to memorize the detail of her face. He narrowed his eyes, searching for surety, reaching for a promise of safety, dreaming of tasting his dad's pabellon criollo again. A quick peek let him know that Nate did the same, but his jittering focus faltered. Manuel kept looking, breaking through the skin.

The extra attention bore through her, and Caiyun cleared her throat. "Just give her time. I'm here to help." She smiled, putting a reassuring hand on Nate's shoulder. Manuel took that as his cue to leave and return to work.

Manuel shuffled into the storage room to take note of each fluid level. After checking the first few, the quiet drove a screw into his head, so he grabbed a screwdriver to seal away both the tanks and the bundle of nerves.



Caiyun stood back in the observation deck, watching Nate's back disappear from around a corner. She took the opportunity to sink onto one of the stools facing the window. Her gaze wandered among the stars, lingering on the brightest ones. They resembled old textbook pages from her mom's bookshelf, the ones she'd spent nights under her covers poring over with a flashlight. Years ago, seeing them closer up was a mere dream pulled from the stories she was told. Stories of her mom's ground control days, however, never compared to actually being in space. In the static of the empty deck, Caiyun could almost hear her mom's laugh from the day she told her she would become an astronaut, that'd be her personal mission. She hadn't heard that laugh in a while, hadn't picked up the phone nearly enough before losing the chance—

The stars seemed duller now. She needed a change of pace, so she got up. Her fingers ran along the wall, stopping at scratches or dents from the past two months in space. She got to the end of the hall, near the living quarters. Through the walls she heard a low conversation between Helena and Nate, and stepped away before she heard anything further. She turned around entirely in the other direction, walking the hopelessness out in hopes that motion would give her a sense of control again. She stopped once more, this

time at the storage room. The kid hummed a tune while ducking out from the cabinets.  
“Everything okay in here?”

When Manuel looked up, he appeared surprised to see the captain poking her head into the doorway. The concern in her dark pupils was highlighted by the developing crows feet around them. She walked further into the room, her face perpetually focused yet open.  
“When’s the last time you ate something?”

“It’s all right, Captain. I’m not hungry.” He picked the screws up from the floor and readied the screwdriver to twist, but a roughened hand delayed the movement.

“I’d like to check it too.”

Manuel blinked at the captain. “Oh.”

“It’s not your work I’m unsure of, it’s...” Myself, her mind whispered. “The ship itself. Since the fuel tank wasn’t calibrated properly to begin with.”

Manuel watched her work, the self-consciousness slowly melting away with each smile thrown his way. Finally, in the presence of someone else, he began to talk. He let out all the little things he’d kept in before. Caiyun chuckled at his half-baked jokes and grew silent when he shared family stories.

“Did you know lobsters taste with their legs?” Manuel said after a long pause.

“Really?”

“Yeah! And they pee out of their eyes! Kinda.”

Caiyun softly laughed. “You know a lot more than just engineering, don’t you?”

“My teachers always say I ask too many questions.” Manuel sounded sheepish, picking at some dirt under his nails. From a brief glimpse, Caiyun saw him frown bitterly at the mention of school. He caught the look and shook off the discomfort.

“I can, um, I can help, Captain.”

“No, it’s fine! And call me Caiyun, not Captain.” She waved a hand as if to bat away the formal title.

“Yes, Captain– uh, Caiyun.”

Manuel grew quiet all of a sudden, and Caiyun hesitated to test the water tank’s temperature. She realized the job was almost completed; weariness tugged at her bones.

“I wonder if I’ll ever get to write my essay,” Manuel unexpectedly mumbled, mostly to himself.

“Excuse me?” Caiyun paused her work to listen.

“That was the assignment I signed up for. Going out really far then turning back seemed pretty simple at the start. My parents, they...they didn’t want me to. But I wouldn’t stop talking about it, so.” he sighed, choked-up. “Here I am.”

“That’s how I feel too. My mom worked in ground control. I followed in her footsteps.”

Manuel’s eyes shone with stars. “She must be proud.”

“I guess. It wasn’t her idea.”

“I’ve never had a mom before,” Manuel whispered. “Only two dads.”

Caiyun felt the teenager’s expectant gaze on her. His deep brown eyes sought solace and comfort in her; Caiyun drew him into a hug as he began to shake. Sobs started to wrack his body, leaning into her as he gave up the effort of sitting up straight. On the reflective metal wall, Caiyun looked at herself—really looked at herself. She saw her dark ponytail, tactfully laid over one shoulder. She saw how carefully it curled at the end, but she also noted the stray hairs poking out. She traced an old faded scar on her chin, and blinked slowly to release the tears from her hooded eyes. Beneath the watery surfaces lay a strength so foundational it trembled under the weight of the world, the earth’s crust crumbling above her with no way to stop it.

Eventually they both pulled back, then leaned against the wall in comfortable silence. Caiyun let out a breath, her chest feeling less tight by the second. Realizing she had left the thermometer inside the storage, she turned back around to retrieve it. Her eyes scanned the dark floor for the device, stuttering at a strange looking screw. She kept searching until she found 3 more identical ones. A smaller panel within the storage lay flat to the ground, one of the screws at each corner. They looked tighter than the others around the ship..

Caiyun ducked her head back into the room and gestured at Manuel to come closer. Wiping the last moisture from his eyes, he tilted his head curiously and complied.

“Manuel...do you recognize these screws?”

“Yeah, those are specialized for more important things. Like a lug nut with a special key.” As he spoke, an understanding dawned on him. “Give me a second.”

Patience mingled with anticipation as Manuel laid out all the screwdrivers he had on him. Caiyun sat by patiently, watching as each head failed to make the screws budge. Finally, one of them caused the slightest of turns. They both gasped, and apprehension began to build as the second, then third, and ultimately the fourth was removed.

Over his shoulder, Caiyun spotted two tanks hidden in the deepest shadows of the rectangular hole underneath. Manuel lifted one of them out with a groan, arms straining, until the captain took the weight into her own hands easily. Once in her lap, she deftly

scanned the label, and a grin broke out across her face. A smile sprouted on Manuel's face, small but determinedly hopeful.

"Is that-?"

"Just enough emergency fuel to get us in rescue distance," Caiyun finished. A laugh escaped her, and she wiped the wetness from her cheeks—the sweat and past tears.

"Manuel..."

Before either could speak further, Nate and Helena appeared at the doorway. Nate had a hand placed on his friend's shoulder, who sent an apologetic smile into the room. There was a barely perceptible squeeze of affirmation. Helena cleared her throat, the sound dry and raw from some recent conversation. "What's going on in here? We heard some noise. And, um, sorry about earlier. I just needed some good news."

"Good news? We have great news!" Manuel beat Caiyun to the punch, leaving the older woman laughing softly under her breath. "We found emergency fuel!"

The two other astronauts startled at the kid's enthusiastic reply and spun to face each other in an instant. When they looked back, Manuel saw a friendliness that wasn't there before. Nate took one step forward. "So that means—"

Caiyun nodded, her strength rising from the metal beneath her and pulled from the crew's newfound joy. She pushed herself off the ground with steady hands; when she stood tall it felt real, and the pieces fell back into place smoother than the jagged edges mere hours ago. "We're going home."

Student Name: Cami Culbertson

Grade: 11

School: Kinkaid School

Title: Rebellious Woman

Category: Poetry

Key: Silver Key

Educator: Angelique Jamail

I am stripped dry,

barren and not ripened—

my lips lacked of the

gloss that stamps them.

Virgin of the kisses

shared with the restrictors—

soft petals of the first

spring's bloom.

I look through the pools

of brown reflected in front of me:

sunken valets pull them

down as my mother

pulled my shirts over my head.

I recognize I am a base,

yet there's awareness

for my hair, and how it

naturally weaves and defies itself.

I am enticed.

I am natural

and in every way,

most myself.

For that,

I love it.

For that,

I am a rebel.

I love that I am nothing,

but the lips and eyes and hair

that I claim for myself.

yet it is rebellion to love

what I am given into–

unto.

I hold my face,

and I fancy myself my own lover.

For every inch of me is my own,

and it is then that I feel

My heart aches in long-love.

It is when I am completely for myself

that my heart burns for being

A Woman.

Student Name: Cynthia Cai  
Grade: 10  
School: Kinkaid School  
Title: The American Dream  
Category: Personal Essay & Memoir  
Key: Silver Key  
Educator: Angelique Jamail

Clouds dyed pink and yellow fill the sky, as the sun begins to rise up over the horizon of New York City. However, the city is already bustling with people, the aroma of coffee and bagels linger in the air and noises of different decibels layer over each other. "The city that never sleeps," the constant dots of bright yellow light coming from windows at the skyline. New York, a city of acceptance, yet people's eyes still turn at the sight of a bright yellow taxi, no matter how long they have lived here. A taxi, something that people unconsciously turn to look at, because of the unnatural bright yellow hue. As I walk down the streets, early in the morning, bundled up in layers upon layers of sweaters and down-feather jackets. Around me are people dressed similarly, yet they don't take a second glance at the people around me, but when their eyes catch mine, they quickly look away. Then, as I look away, their eyes do a double take, and yet they think I don't see a thing. I like to think that they don't stare at me differently because I don't think I'm that different. Maybe if that continues to be my mindset, eventually, I'll feel comfortable with the judging stares. Or, maybe it's easier to just pretend like I'm unaffected. I don't know. "Go back to your country!" I catch a man yelling from the other side of the train, before he shuts up at once, after seeing that my eyes have found him. The hideous epitome of the culture of America, the sickly saccharine sweetness of people who leisurely shifts away. The murky, slow marmalade sugar-coating sloshing sluggishly in my stomach, I only grit my teeth and give him a sneering smile. The pit in my stomach makes way for the large fluttering butterflies— not even butterflies, just flies, that twitch and fly around aimlessly. The substantially miniscule once-over from several pairs of eyes a day. Helming the way my day succeeds and the parasitic notions of self-incrimination, that I have gone amiss. Thinking back to the several times something of a similar extent has occurred, the feeling of dread still washes over me to this day. The existential crisis of "do I belong here?" My stomach drops me into a wasteful void, it bites me like the cold. But this is my country as much as it is yours, America wouldn't be the mixing pot of countries without us. This is my country too.

I feel their eyes creepily shifting back and forth, from my mom, to me. I'm just in a subway, standing far away, leaning on the glass pane. Yet people still shift away, like I was the one who brought the "Asian-virus" to America. Like I am the reason that everyone is forced to wear a mask, out and about. They blame me, but reality is, they still do not wear

masks. They are the ones who notoriously spread the virus and still don't wear masks. It's uncomfortable, because they don't have to say anything, yet I still know exactly what they're thinking. My new school is predominantly white, that's not an opinion, but rather a fact. So when I walk in for the first time, to shadow a student, once again, for the umpteenth time in my considerably short life, all eyes automatically shift to me. I walk past several people, huge and bulky, who stop their conversation just to look at me. Maybe I should feel honored to get that much attention. Whispers flood the room. I'm the taxi, aren't I? But no one ever pays the price of driving me crazy. The most ironic thing, however, is that people will feel disgusted by me and the color of my skin, yet still find it in their black, withered hearts to fetishize all Asians. "Man, I'd love to have an Asian girl as my girlfriend, they're always so small and petite." The standards of America and East Asia are so vastly different. In East Asia, pale skin and looking delicate and childlike is ideal, while in America, looking mature and having "grown into the curves" is the standard. How can I fit into both? They say all of this as if we aren't human, an alien species, here only to satisfy their needs. The catcalls and loud whistles I get, not only as a female, but especially as a female of color. It became disgustingly apparent at a very young age for me, that people don't care about others, if it doesn't involve them. Humans are selfish and repulsive creatures, obvious by the apparent disdain and inconsiderate actions.

Funnily enough, as if life isn't hard enough, people will take advantage of your gender as well. The gender norms of "women should stay in the kitchen" and "men have the brains and the brawn, women are our personal play toys." I live in a relatively safe neighborhood, low crime rates and many Asian friends because of the location of the neighborhood. Yet growing up, I was taught the same thing as a woman in an unsafe neighborhood would be taught. Don't go out past sundown, if you need to, make sure you're in a well lit area with many people, always go out with a group of friends. If you're alone, dress as a guy, wear bulky clothing, if you see anyone who makes you feel uncomfortable, walk in the opposite direction. At night, when I walk my neighborhood, I will always walk under the street-lights. When I live alone, I will always be careful about what I portray to the public about my private life. The idea that women do this on a daily basis, just to live a safer life, is horrific and disgusting. The idea that even after taking all these precautions, we could still be subjected to the same harassment. At eight years old, I was in Shanghai to visit family. Me and my mother had taken a taxi from the airport to our hotel. A large, buff man was driving the taxi, as he maneuvered the car around central Shanghai, he would continuously look at the rearview mirror, several times my eyes caught his and he just stared, then his eyes would just flash back onto the road. By the half hour mark, my mother was getting suspicious, but we both brushed it off as traffic. By the 45 minute mark, we had crossed the same bridge three times. It was at the one hour mark, that he announced we were here. My mom didn't say anything, only nodded politely and paid the astronomically high taxi bill. We check-in, and the first thing my mother does is pull out her phone. She calls the Shanghai taxi and tells them about the scam that the man had pulled. After being assured that it would be resolved, my mother

told me about how the man utilized the fact that it was me and my mother, two females who wouldn't stand a chance even if we tried, so my mother said nothing, opting to wait until after the taxi ride to report it. However much we try to fit into American standards, we will always be Asian, before ever being American.

I was born and raised in America, my parents both have American citizenships, we are all American, but because we don't look Caucasian, we're not American? The ideology does not make sense, especially in a country that is considered "The Great Mixing Pot." The extremity of Houston's racism is horrific, not only to Asians for causing the coronavirus, but to other races that are not "white." Houston is especially famous for its white supremacy and how they react to other races, it's as if they believe they are the only race on Earth. However, that is not the only place that I have experienced racism towards me and other Asians in general. We were vacationing in Spain at an outdoor market, when a man ushered us over, only to loudly exclaim, "Konichiwa!" He didn't even consider asking us what ethnicity we were, just his predetermined thought that "oh all Asians or people who look predominantly Asian are East Asian, more specifically, Chinese, Korean, or Japanese. It's not possible for West Asia to exist, South Asia doesn't either. I see someone who has fox eyes, Anneonghasayo!" Then they have the audacity to be proud, to act like they just cured world hunger and established world peace. This is just more and more proof of racism being widespread, even in places that claim they are inclusive.

The racism and gender inequality around the world is an issue that has yet to be solved. It is an ever expanding and growing form of contagious disease like the coronavirus that in this lifetime will likely not be solved. The ideas of men and women being of different social classes, and different hierarchies. Not only that, but the stereotypes of different races, other than whites. Soon, people must begin to realize that their words and actions have an effect on people. That a single sentence, possibly meant in an unharmed or joking manner can very easily be taken to heart. That race or gender is not something to laugh about. But still, after hundreds of years of movements, we are still somehow moving backwards, in time. But still, after hundreds of years, people have not learned to be accepting of anyone and everyone.

Student Name: Helen Zhang  
Grade: 11  
School: Kinkaid School  
Title: The Earth Mother's Burden  
Category: Poetry  
Key: Silver Key  
Educator: Angelique Jamail

In the beginning  
of the end, our lives  
held suspended in pale  
pink nothingness. Gaea  
steps forward, the  
world  
of solid earth and stone  
encased in her motherly figure. Born  
of Chaos, her being is constructed from  
pale, scintillating mist, she is created from  
nothingness itself. She meets a man, a man of  
freckled skin and indigo eyes, a man who holds  
the realm of above in his palm. When they lie in bed  
together, he paints a new pattern of stars on his inky  
skin and says it's for her. A line of diamonds em-  
bedded in bruised tissue, Gaea plants weathered  
lips to ebony skin and traces new sparks onto  
his flesh. She slices herself open, soil  
pours from her womb in grotesque  
creations, her flesh is stained gold as the  
dying sun. She gathers her fragile children

in her hands, but they are trapped in a tomb  
of stygian iron, red illuminates the space in a hellish  
glow, rubies left to rot in the dark, suffocating silently  
for a taste of a father's love. Gaea slumbers and leaves her  
children to fight for their lives, her essence is rendered as weak  
as the trees that splinter with the wind, flakes of bark peel and  
spiral like mahogany stars in evergreen sky. As the mortals distort  
and engorge, as cities swell and burn in plumes of fire and ash, Gaea  
shoulders their weight alone, a fragile woman of earth borne of stone.  
Putrid smoke renders air unbreathable, Gaea's waters are filled with a thin  
sheen of obsidian glass, her aquatic children wash up onto the shore of their  
mother, pleading for her lissome fingers to cleanse their gills and restore the gift  
of life. Helpless, Gaea watches her figure crumble into obscurity, earth is replaced  
by barges of steel and concrete and glass, skyscrapers invade the domain of her  
husband,  
the man she once loved, mere mortals carve her constellation out of the sky. The jagged  
buildings  
perforate the silence of night, bruising the sky in a punishing hue of purple and blue and  
pink, ichor  
seeps through the gashes in a silent sacrifice to the stars that watch it die, unfeeling. Soil  
crumbles, its structures  
aren't built to hold this weight. Gaea crumbles to nothingness, and what's left of our  
world succumbs to Chaos  
once more. This is the end of the end.

Student Name: Isabel Cooper

Grade: 9

School: Kinkaid School

Title: The Gaze

Category: Poetry

Key: Silver Key

Educator: Angelique Jamail

Bright colors awaken,

Bleeding into my brain.

Eye contact has been made.

It feels as if I have been struck by lightning,

Paralyzed with wonder,

Unaware of the world around me.

Bending into a new reality,

Silent and wonderstruck,

I stood still.

Nothing is said, yet everything is understood.

Student Name: Jackson Holton  
Grade: 10  
School: Kinkaid School  
Title: The Green Asteroid  
Category: Science Fiction & Fantasy  
Key: Silver Key  
Educator: Angelique Jamail

Kal scanned his card and watched as the light flashed green. The door slid open, and he mentally prepared himself for another day of asteroid mining. Kal couldn't wait until the job lottery in three weeks. Hopefully, he would get to work somewhere good, such as communications or the greenhouse.

It wasn't that he didn't like working at the mining station, but it was a one-person job, and he got pretty lonely sometimes. Kal settled into his chair and put his headset on. The itchy fabric rubbed against his face, and blackness covered his vision. After a minute, the headset finished starting up, and he got to work. Working asteroids was a simple job; he had to pilot the remote-controlled shuttle over to any of the nearby rocks and hook on to it.

After successfully finding a decent-sized piece of rock, Kal sat back and watched the shuttle do its thing. He learned early on it was best to let it be, or he might accidentally cause a crash. Genesis Base could not afford another disaster. It was a one-of-a-kind, completely independent space station that housed over a hundred people. Sadly, the government didn't see it that way. According to them, the station wasn't producing enough resources to make it economically valuable. And it was true, Kal thought. The problem was they had no way of knowing what metals it would contain until they brought it in.

Besides that one problem, Genesis Base was remarkable. They had a fully functioning water recycling plant, greenhouse, oxygen capture system, solar panels, and launch bay. Researchers claimed they could stay up there indefinitely. Kal had a moderate 500-square-foot apartment in the residential section with its own kitchen and bathroom.

A sharp ding stirred Kal, and he got up to deal with the newly arrived debris. He opened the door to the airlock and loaded a cart full of everything the ship brought in. He pushed the cart over to the deconstruction machine in the other room and filled it with the raw materials. It was a fascinating new invention that extracted the metal without using the old, highly dangerous, method of laser saws. The conveyor belt suddenly stopped, and a high-pitched siren started coming from the device. Kal plugged his ears and looked around, alarmed by the warning. A warning message flashed across the screen, 'Unknown Substance Detected.' Kal dismissed the message and started to reverse the

deconstruction process. Almost immediately, his phone started to ring; it was the supervisor, Jonathan. Grabbing the phone, he said, "Hey Jonathan, how are you doing?"

"Better now; I was worried something had happened over there. What was the siren about?" Jonathan asked.

"Something about an unidentified substance in the deconstructor." Kal wasn't that worried. The machine had made mistakes before, but they usually fixed themselves.

"Really? We haven't had one of those in a while. My feed says it's something new, but let me contact Houston. One sec, I'll call you back."

Kal hung up the phone and looked around; there wasn't much to do except mine asteroids, so he walked over to the deconstructor. The rock that caused the error was sitting on the side, so he picked it up and examined it. It was about five-kilogram rock. The dusty gray surface looked like any other rock except for some sort of green crystal near the bottom. He held it near his chest and could sense the slightest heat coming from it, but that was probably resting in the ship's hold. Kal decided to take a chance and bring it over to the science section of the ship. The lab was the newest piece of tech on the station. New holographic technology allowed floating screens to pull up all sorts of information. If there was anywhere that had information, it was there.

No one was there when Kal arrived, so he fired up the analysis devices and inserted the rock. The process would take a while, so Kal called Johnathan back. He picked up on the first ring, "Hey man, what's up? I just got off the phone with Earth. They've told us to send that rock thing you found down with the next ship."

"Great," Kal responded, "I just put it in the analyzer, so we should find out what it is soon. Until then, how are things going up there? Everything running smoothly?"

"Oh yeah, great."

Kal and Johnathan continued talking, but then suddenly, another typical ding interrupted them, "Great, it's done," Kal said, "The results, on the other hand, are not that great."

Jonathan sighed, "What's wrong?"

"No, nothing wrong; there's just a little glitch. For some reason, it can't ID this stuff. I know we've only been mining the asteroid belt for a decade or so now, but I thought they discovered the last element back in 2150."

"How about you just put it on a table and head over to the med-bay, make sure it didn't do anything to you. Earth warned that the last substance we discovered was extremely radioactive, and this one might be, too. We can worry about what it is once we know everyone's safe."

Johnathan sounded much more concerned now, and Kal trusted his friends' instinct. He immediately ran for it and sealed the door behind him. Thankfully, right next door to the

lab was the health center. Maria, their resident nurse, was just inside and ready to help. Kal quickly explained the situation, and she hurried him into one of the radiology rooms.

“Hold still, and I will start looking for any harmful radiation. You should be okay because you didn’t spend that much time with it without knowing what it is; who knows what might have happened.”

After a few minutes, Maria returned and said, “Okay, I have some good news. You’re relatively healthy and are perfectly stable for the moment.” She trailed off, looking at him.

Kal felt dread in the pit of his stomach, “What else?”

“It seems to... It has caused some tissue damage in your heart from holding it too close to your chest.” Maria said, her eyes welling up, “It doesn’t look too dangerous right now, but in a few years, it could prove fatal. I’m sorry.”

Kal couldn’t respond. He felt like just falling over and crying, but he fought off the overwhelming sadness. He still had plenty of time to find a cure. He didn’t even want to think about the alternative. At least the substance was already loaded and ready to send to Earth. Who knows what else might happen if they didn’t keep that thing tightly sealed? Kal tried to settle down and get some sleep, but terrible thoughts and concerns prevented him from succeeding. Kal knew he had a restless night ahead, so he took advantage of the unlocked cabinets and got some sedatives.

The next morning, everything was prepared for departure, and Kal volunteered to be the one to carry the unknown material over to the ship. He didn’t want to risk it somehow infecting another person, and it wasn’t like he could get much worse anyway.

On the way to the loading bay, Kal noticed Johnathan nearby and walked over to talk to him, “Hey Johnathan, did you ever figure out what caused the malfunction?”

“Oh yeah, after a few more attempts, it turns out that thing,” he said, nodding towards the case in Kal’s hands, “is actually something new and highly radioactive. Go load it up. The Commander says that GSO has a radioactive chamber to contain it.”

GSO stands for the Global Space Organization. Based in Houston, it monitored and regulated all space activity, from mining to travel to the permanent Mars colonies. Even though he didn’t agree with many of their decision, they were the ones who launched Genesis base in the first place, and for that, he was grateful.

He returned to Johnathan and said, “It’s ready. The ship is being launched as we speak.” Kal could hear the rockets powering up and felt the vibrations run through him as they rocked the station. His flight home was moved up to tomorrow with the weekly shipment of metals. Maria hoped that the scientists on Earth had a better way of dealing with radiation. The medical equipment on the station hadn’t been updated in around a decade.

The crew settled into one of the lounges nearby and waited for confirmation of a successful launch. Suddenly, one of the TVs flashed on, and an incoming call from Earth appeared. Jonathan quickly accepted, and the face of Commander Ashton filled the screen.

"We have a problem," he said in his stereotypical rough voice, "During the launch, some space debris impacted the vessel, incapacitating the heat shields and emergency parachute. If the ship enters the atmosphere, it will most likely explode and spread radioactive waste all over Earth. You know what must be done."

"Of course, Commander," Jonathan responded, "We will send Kal, our asteroid miner, to intercept the vessel immediately."

"Good, but not good enough. That substance is extremely dangerous, and we can not store it at your station. At this time, the board feels that it would be more practical to simply make it disappear. We don't need the public worrying about new dangerous crystals, and we definitely need to prevent a weapon of some sort from being developed. The last hold-outs of global unification could use a substance like that. We need it removed from this solar system, and I think you know who will do it."

Kal looked up with a resigned sigh; he knew it might come to this. Jonathan gave him a sad look and said, "Good luck, old friend."

The mining ship was a repurposed transport ship and still had a cockpit and storage bay. The mission was simple: grab the vessel, load it in the bay, and fly away. Take off was easy; the autopilot did most of the work, but the hard part would be retrieving the shuttle without damaging the cargo hold. Thankfully, the flight was also easy. The control center had deactivated the main thrusters, and his target had slowed down to manageable speeds.

Kal took a deep breath and focused on his job. Slowly but steadily, he maneuvered the transport into his cargo hold. He could hear the ding and scrapes as the two ships collided. He finally managed to get the end of the vessel into his ship, and from there, all he had to do was back up, and it was in. But his mission was not yet complete. Kal knew he couldn't return to the station. The danger from the polonium was still too much. It was good that all ships were outfitted with a few weeks of rations. He had always wanted to see Jupiter, and there was no better place to throw away highly radioactive materials. The trip would only be about a week round trip anyway. That gave the scientist a chance to find a solution to his predicament before he got back. Life could be worse, Kal thought. By the time I get back, they should've found a cure. Kal smiled and started entering his new destination, "This might not be that bad after all," he said to himself, "I've always wanted to visit Saturn too, and maybe I'll hit up a few of those dwarf planets along the way."

Student Name: Sophia Nguyen

Grade: 7

School: Kinkaid School

Title: The Haunted House

Category: Flash Fiction

Key: Silver Key

Educator: Angelique Jamail

I used to live here. The old, abandoned house with boards that covered the windows. The fence that surrounded the house so no one could go in. The house where children would make up stories and say that it was haunted and everybody would believe it. The house that towered over me.

But I used to live here. To me, the house was a colorful rainbow, even though it looked like dark clouds. The house where I had brushed my teeth, ate my food, and spent quality time with my mom and dad was filled with cheerful air. The house was filled with memories of my childhood.

My mom had gone missing before I turned thirteen. Sometimes when I was still living in this house and I was alone in the dead of night, I had felt her. I had heard the soft whispers of her voice calling my name in the wind. I had heard her distant, soft laugh from the rustling of the trees outside. I had even heard the creaking of the floorboards when she would come to my bedroom to tuck me to sleep. I just knew my mom was there.

That was what separated me from everyone else.

People thought that the wind were evil spirits shrieking and begging for help. The creaking of the house reminded them of bones breaking and bugs biting. I could hear everyone in my town sighing with relief when they heard the news. The same news that had brought me back to the front of the fence every single morning before school. The house was going to be destroyed because everybody thought it was haunted.

I looked around me and it was the same as every day. Barely any people were on the street just because of this house. I looked down at my arm. The cast was covered in a dull purple color with people's writings and drawings. I looked back up at the house. A tear rolled down my eye.

No one knew what happened to my mom. She was reported missing for a few months until the police gave up. But I didn't want to give up. Everybody told me to stop trying to look for her, including my dad. But I couldn't. I felt like there was still hope. When I was younger, my mom and I would play games every weekend that included clues. I found clues around my house that almost got me to find out where she actually was. But it also

caused my arm to break from falling in a dark, steep basement that I never knew we had. When my dad found out that I was still trying to look for her, he moved us to another house.

I tried convincing my dad multiple times that I was so close to finding my mom and a silly broken arm wouldn't interfere with my search, but he wouldn't believe me. He took me to therapy and told me that he should've made the decision to take me to a professional right after my mom went missing. Now, he doesn't believe any words that come out of my mouth. My dad moved us away from the house because he was frightened of the memories that the house contained of my mom.

School was about to start, and I needed to get there before the bell rang. But I needed to get in that house one more time, too. I needed to feel my mom's presence in my home. I never said a proper goodbye to my childhood. I looked around the neighborhood. Still empty. I ran to the side of the gate where I saw a hole in the old, rusty fence. I dropped my heavy backpack on the ground and squeezed my body in, and I snuck into my old house. I busted the door open and stood in the front of my house.

After months of not being able to step into this house, here I was. The still air was so quiet, I felt like I couldn't disturb it. Light from the small openings of the boards covering the windows spilled into the house. Small dust particles floated in the air, motionless. I took my first step into the house for the first time in a long time.

My heart slowed down. My shoulders dropped and relaxed. In my peripheral vision, I saw the hole I created on the floor when I crashed into the secret basement and broke my arm. My eyelids went heavy and I felt like I could breathe normally again. My chest rose up and down at an even pace. For the first time in a long time, I felt calm and peaceful. I felt like I could stay here forever. Underneath my feet, I felt the heartbeat of my mom and the soft breathing that I followed with my own breathing. I felt a sudden rush of calmness into my body and it felt good. I forgot about everything that was happening in the present and around me. I forgot about school, my dad, and the house that was about to be broken down. All I focused on was my mom's presence and me. That's what I focused on for a long time.

Student Name: Cynthia Cai  
Grade: 10  
School: Kinkaid School  
Title: The Moth  
Category: Poetry  
Key: Silver Key  
Educator: Angelique Jamail

i.

A lonely blue eyed moth lands on the windowsill of his room and watches as he cries alone every night, mourning the death of his relationship. He blames himself for their breakup, for not putting enough effort into them. Until one night, he comes home smiling instead of sobbing.

The moth perches on the wet ceramic plant plate and peers in. His face is lit by the bluish light from his phone, smile wide and free. His fingers fly rapidly across the screen, he is texting someone. The moth feels a tug at its heart, the moth is content.

One day, he brings the girl over. A goddess of otherworldly beauty. The moth stares in awe, at her tumbling raven locks past her waist and her pearl white skin. She visits more and more often, stays the night more and more often, the moth doesn't mind. Soon, she does not leave anymore and his house becomes theirs.

ii.

The moth sits on the windowsill of his room. A velvet black box hides away in the corner of his desk, hidden by papers and books arranged in a particular form.

He comes into his room, a stink of sweat and fading deodorant.

The first thing he does is check on the ring.

It glints in the moonlight, the moth admires its beauty.

A pear cut diamond lined set in a rose gold band.

It reveals itself to the world, vulnerable as the love of a man.

She walks in moments after the man fumbles to put it away.

She struts an imaginary walkway as he admires respectfully.

She laughs as he twirls her in circles and they dance a waltz with ease.

The moth stares confused, perhaps it cannot hear the melody.

iii.

Months pass, the box is still in that same place,

the moth wishes to see it again, but the man has not yet opened it again.

Every night, the moth witnesses him say, "Tomorrow" through the weathering glass window.

And the moth silently roots, for the man to finally build up the courage.

Slowly, the box collects dust in the corner, the moth gets hungry looking at the bugs.

A spider's lacy masterpiece decorates the once clean corner.

One night, she comes home especially late.

He sits in his room, staring at the closed box, set in front of him

She sees him and attacks him from behind with warm kisses mapping his face.

He smiles bashfully, and the moth shakes with excitement.

He gets on one knee and she bursts into tears of joy, a stream of happiness falls quickly.

She nods her head and pulls him up, the moth almost falls off the window.

iv.

The following weeks are filled with passion between them, the moth is embarrassed to watch.

The moth leaves for the next couple months, uncomfortable and unwilling to watch.

When the moth comes back, it sees his head in his hands, clawing at his face in long streaks.

His yells are heard from outside, from over the November wind and coming frost.

The next morning, the woman comes back.

Her hair is a mess, she is barefoot and carries herself with shame.

The moth follows her, seeing her sneak past him into the guest room.

The man finds her when he wakes up and he climbs into bed, lulling himself back to sleep.

The woman has lost their engagement ring. The moth overhears why they were arguing.

The moth observes without a noise, as the man gets on his knees and hands.

He rakes his hands through the beige carpet laid all over the apartment, digging for the ring.

A triumphant scream emerges from his mouth, and he holds up the ring, dusty and dirty.

v.

The couple gets married a warm March afternoon, the moth peers at them as they drive home from their honeymoon in a new red Porsche.

The next two years are heaven on earth for them, the moth is turning old.

It knows it's about to die.

One night, the dying moth overhears a last thing before losing all hearing.

It's them arguing. Arguing over the bills, or taxes, or the time she cheated on him.

The last words it ever hears are “Why are we married?”

The man cries himself to sleep at night, and the moth wishes it could open the window.

They divorce, on a shiver inducing January morning, frigid like their relationship.

They leave with thick packets of manila folders in their hands.

They drive different cars and do not look back. He will not come back to the apartment, he will sell it and never visit again.

The moth, unrested and unwell, mourns the relationship like it participated in their love.

Witnessing the building of their love and disassembling of their love.

It watches their warm admiration turn into cold glares.

And finally,

finally,

the saddened blue eyed moth falls off the windowsill.

Student Name: Andrew Lian

Grade: 11

School: Kinkaid School

Title: The Myth of Squirrels and the Sonoran Desert

Category: Short Story

Key: Silver Key

Educator: Angelique Jamail

Around the 15th-16th century, a large number of bandits committed a huge heist on a local government building. Stealing roughly three million in today's dollars, the group, known as the Red Hog Company, had around twenty two official members with every individual being highly skilled in combat, survival, and stealth. To escape the English government, the outlaws decided to escape to Africa by boat. Unfortunately for them, a violent storm blew them west landing them in an undiscovered area now known as North America.

Their food gone, their treasure lost, and most of all their company dead, four of the Red Hog Company members stepped foot onto land for the first time in thirty five days. They immediately noticed that something was off. The smell, the land, and the climate was much different than it is back home. A few have even noted that it is nothing like what they've heard about Africa. It is said that they trekked the land for over a year, feasting on local birds and fish while drinking water from rivers and lakes, before arriving at an open field. They settled there, building small cabins with all the commodities needed, from a food pantry to beds. They built a good life there with barely any problems among the group and in the wilderness itself.

One day a member named Squire walked into the forest to hunt for dinner. For no particular reason, he decided to walk deeper into the woods than any of them have ever done before. After killing a raccoon, turkey, and some fish, Squire realizes that he is lost. He ventures through the forest looking for any recognizable trees, bushes, or landmarks that can lead him back to camp. As nightfall approached, panic started setting into Squire's mind and he knew that his current strategy wasn't working. He sat alone in the dark, preparing a fire in case he needed to settle somewhere, while eating the food he collected that day. Suddenly, an idea hit him. The smoke from a fire could alert his peers, who are definitely getting worried now. Squire quickly began hitting the stones together, creating a spark that subsequently lit a flame. Unfortunately, the smoke wasn't clear or big enough to be recognizable from miles away. To fix this problem, Squire began throwing more and more firewood into the flames. The smoke and flames from this

picked up, but it wasn't enough, especially with the wind that night. As a result Squire directed the flames to shrubs, tall grass, and trees which abruptly lit up in flames, smoke, and fire. Squire watched as the flames climbed tree trunks, forcing all the animals inside to run out while also burning the leaves and sticks off. Soon enough, a gigantic wave of smoke hit the air and clouded the vision of Squire to the point where he couldn't see his hand in front of his face. Luckily, his plan worked. A few minutes after setting the fire, his friends were able to find him a short distance away from the flames. Squire was overjoyed, having spent nearly the whole day in the woods, he quickly ran back to the cabin with the other members, jumping onto his bed as he embraced the warmth of his blanket.

Squire woke up in a pitch black room. It was extremely dark to the point where he couldn't tell which direction he was going. It was extremely cold and his breath hung in the air after each exhale. Every step felt like he was treading in deep water. He wandered aimlessly until he was able to make out something in the distance: a bright glowing piece of paper. Reading from the paper, Squire states:

"While you sleep alone

Creatures are burning down to the bone

The sky is dark red tonight

As the flames of your actions burn bright"

Squire really woke up this time, in his bed. He instantly could smell the burning wood that continued throughout the night. As he stepped outside, he was horrified to see the open field become a charred black mess, as if someone dumped orange molton-hot sewage all over. The ground became yellow, as if the fires left a huge stain, and the Earth also felt soft as each step sucked Squire's foot into the soil. As he made his way to the food pantry, he instantly noticed that something was off. The crops that they've grown have either withered and burnt overnight and crumbs from the food pantry were scattered all over the camp. As he entered the food pantry he noticed a great ball of light hovering over all the food they have gathered since they've landed. Too bright for his eyes, Squire covered his pupils but he was able to see the ball of light summon the dirt, dust, and mud from the ground in the cabin. As the debris shifts up and down, Squire watches this celestial squish and squash, as if it's creating pottery, the mud into the shape of a small gray furry four legged mammal. These new animals were very nimble, quickly chewing, munching, and taking anything consumable it can get its hands on.

Three weeks passed, and the animals produced by the ball of light, now named "squirrels" by the other Red Hog Company members after Squire's unhinged tangent

regarding the ball of light, have not left the field. The grassland also became uninhabitable. The new soil was unplatable and cut the feet of anyone who walks on it. The charred stems of trees have grown into a green deformed shape and the branches that survived the fire developed sharp edges. The scorch of the flames hasn't left either as the temperature has risen every day since the fire. The squirrels haven't made their situation better as the animals have polluted and stolen every inch of nourishment that any member of the company has collected. The squirrels have also drilled holes into the infrastructure of the cabins, causing them to collapse, to serve as nesting dens.

Squire, plagued by guilt that he caused his friends to starve and caused the creation of something like a scorched Earth, reached a conclusion: that he must seek this ball of light to fix his own actions. As the new week approached, Squire gathered his supplies and some food and left his friends to seek the ball of light. It is said that after a few days that Squire left, the squirrels receded into the burning land, never to return to the location again. Squire himself also never returned but a member of the Red Hog Company dubbed the yellow hot dangerous land as the "Sonoran Desert" after Squire's non-bandit name: Sonoran.

Student Name: Shaivi Moparthi

Grade: 9

School: Kinkaid School

Title: The Power of Positivity

Category: Journalism

Key: Silver Key

Educator: Angelique Jamail

Positivity is such a powerful word. A positive gesture has the power to change the world. Nevertheless, positivity is tough to practice and something that is often overlooked. Without positivity, our world would be very different, a place that would be unimaginable for me and for many of us.

Recently, I've had the great opportunity to interview Dr. Jay Glynn, a licensed counseling psychologist at The Kinkaid School. Dr. Glynn has a Ph.D. from The University of Texas at Austin and has been an educator/counselor for nearly 40 years. Through this interview, Dr. Glynn has helped me understand the importance of recognizing the silver linings in life and how one can lead a happy and meaningful life by embracing and practicing positivity daily.

Positivity in the aftermath of a pandemic

Over the past couple of years, we've had many wins and losses. We've seen so many new things that we otherwise wouldn't have been able to experience in the past. Yet, in the never-ending dark tunnel that seemed to define the pandemic, we slowly forgot about positivity with all the obstacles we faced.

The pandemic isolated people both physically and emotionally. Shifting to online learning, leading to reduced social interaction, is one example of the isolation we've faced. "It's been over three years since the pandemic started, and we've seen that this is a huge developmental time for middle and high schoolers particularly. People have had a delay in development because they've missed those social opportunities and those opportunities for growth," says Dr. Glynn.

As we reflect, it's essential to continue to stay positive. Try to stay connected with friends and family. Even just a quick "hello" or brief chat can brighten someone's day positively. For those who are still working/learning from home, try to go for a walk with a family member and spend some time in nature. It's the little things that make life a little better.

### Positive Psychology vs. Positive Thinking

Positivity psychology is something that is up and coming in the field of psychology. The primary purpose of positive psychology is to find happiness, and it focuses on keeping the key elements that make people happy. Dr. Glynn shared that “positive psychology’s goal is for people to stay happy, and continue to have a positive attitude throughout their day to live a healthy lifestyle.”

This shows how positive psychology is very similar to positive thinking. Positive thinking is simply making the best of every situation and finding the good in whatever you do. “Studies of happiness show that money, intelligence, and GPA have little to do with people being happier later in life. It’s more about that feeling of grit and feeling of self-belonging and self-worth that they are contributing,” Dr. Glynn explained. Keeping this positive outlook will also give you a greater chance for improvement and learning in the future.

### Benefits of having a positive lifestyle

Research shows that people who are positive live longer because they tend to lead happier and healthier lives. There is so much about our mental and emotional health that connects to our physical health. “Taking care of ourselves emotionally affects the length of our lives,” said Dr. Glynn.

One of the most apparent benefits of positivity is a decreased chance of depression. In addition, a theory suggests having a positive mindset reduces the negative repercussions of stress. Therefore, it’s essential to identify your negative thinking and do your best to change that negative mindset to a positive one. Being resilient and having the ability to cope with stress is an enormous factor in staying healthy.

Another less commonly known benefit of positive thinking is that optimists can often recover faster from injuries/illness and have increased immunity. For example, a study showed that when areas of the brain related to negative emotions are active, people had a weaker response to the flu vaccine. Positivity also leads to better cardiovascular health and more protection from certain diseases.

Simply trying to be positive is enough. Surround yourself with people who support you and care for you. Tackle problems you face in life with a positive attitude and accept change. Doing these simple things can aid you in living more contently.

### Embracing positivity

Our attitude and our perspective are everything. A growth mindset says that even if you are not good at something right now, you have the ability to believe that you can become better. "Success in my mind is more about a sense of belonging and a community. The people who have a growth mindset are those who are the happiest in their lives," Dr. Glynn explained. It's important not to think about whether you won or lost in something, but rather if you improved as a person.

Positivity is something simple. Being students, positivity is harder to practice with the challenges that every new day brings. Instead of thinking things such as "I'm not good at this," think more along the lines of "I'm not good at this yet, but I will improve." Doing these little

changes to your mindset can help you improve.

Sometimes merely being grateful and showing thanks can go a long way. Take time to appreciate the things that make you happy and the people who help you feel satisfied. Embracing positivity daily is something that can be tough, but it's good to start small. Just showing gratitude daily is a great way to take a step forward into embracing positivity the best that you can.

Overall, there are five things that we do daily that help us maintain a positive balance in life. This includes sleep, social interaction, challenging yourself to learn new things, sports/physical activity, and service/giving to others. These things help increase those "feel good" hormones such as dopamine and serotonin and help decrease cortisol, which is the stress hormone. In his closing remarks, Dr. Glynn said, "Whenever you're feeling anxious or stressed, look at those five things and see which ones you aren't getting enough of. This helps keep a positive mindset possible."

If you practice changing the way you think, act, how you feel every single day, cultivating gratitude for small things you have in life, while being consistent with it, then you will see a steady, gradual change in your life. Dr. Glynn's words are a prominent example, "Even just a kind word can go a long way. By instilling positivity in yourself and others, you have the potential to change the world through positivity."

Student Name: Shaivi Moparthi

Grade: 9

School: Kinkaid School

Title: Unlocking the Secrets of Space - A Glimpse into NASA's Vision

Category: Journalism

Key: Silver Key

Educator: Angelique Jamail

What does it take to become an astronaut? There is no better person to ask than Vanessa E. Wyche, director of NASA's Johnson Space Center, in Houston, Texas. Part of her job is to recruit and train astronauts for missions to the International Space Station (ISS), and for the Artemis program, which could take people to the moon and Mars.

"We look for people who can work well with others, because you will be in an enclosed environment for a long time," Wyche says. But most of all, "We are looking for people who are curious and want to learn."

As an aspiring scientist, I have always been curious about what it takes to work at NASA. So, in last October, I sat down with Wyche at the Johnson Space Center, home to America's astronaut corps, Mission Control Center, and the ISS, Orion, and Gateway programs.

Wyche has worked at Johnson for more than 30 years. She started out as a project engineer, studying the effects of space on the human body. Then she moved on to the Space Shuttle Program, eventually becoming the flight manager and overseeing the shuttle missions that built the ISS. In 2016, she joined the exploration team and started planning missions to the moon and Mars. A couple of years later, she became the deputy director of the space center, and in 2021, she took up her current position. As the space center's director, she oversees human spaceflight activities including the development and operation of spacecraft, the commercialization of low-Earth orbit, and the goal of landing the first woman on the moon's surface.

Wyche says it was her parents who taught her to love learning and investigation. "They were both teachers, and they encouraged me to pursue my curiosities," she says. "I did everything from sports to gymnastics, tap, jazz, and music. And I was a Girl Scout."

That curiosity naturally led to an interest in science. “One Christmas, my brother got a chemistry set, and I was his apprentice,” Wyche recalls. “I would help him with his experiments.” Her father, who was a carpenter, enlisted her help in rewiring the family’s house. “What he taught my brother, he also taught me,” Wyche says. “That gave me the confidence that I could actually pursue a career in STEM.”

Wyche earned a Bachelor of Science in Engineering and a Master of Science in Bioengineering from Clemson University. She worked for the United States Food and Drug Administration, in Washington, D.C., then joined NASA in 1989.

Last November, NASA began a new era in spaceflight, when it launched an uncrewed Artemis rocket toward the moon, from the Kennedy Space Center, in Cape Canaveral, Florida. This mission is sending a capsule around the moon and back. It’s a big test of the Artemis Program. “The first mission was to test out the spacecraft, to ensure our astronauts will be able to go and come back safely,” Wyche says. “The next mission will have humans on board, and will test out the system with them integrated into the loop. Then, at some point, “the next mission will be the landing mission.” NASA plans to land in locations on the moon where astronauts can do in situ resource utilization. For this project, that means taking a resource such as water, which is found on the moon, and turning it into oxygen. That would enable scientists to live on the moon’s surface over long periods of time. Their research, Wyche says, could teach us about the origins of our solar system.

Research that is currently being done on the ISS could produce benefits here on Earth. For example, scientists there are learning how to recycle water. That technology would be helpful on a planet where water is becoming increasingly scarce. And experiments on heart cells could lead to treatments for cancer.

The role of the Artemis generation, as Wyche terms it, extends beyond space missions. It involves leveraging the knowledge gained from space research to address challenges on Earth. The technologies developed for space applications, such as water recycling and medical advancements, hold the potential to address some of the most pressing issues facing our planet.

Wyche says the trait required of prospective astronauts is the same one young people need for a career in the sciences: curiosity. “Go to science camps,” she advises, “and just feed your curiosity. Learn as much as you can, and continue pursuing your passion.

You've got to just keep pushing. Go to college, get your degree, and then come be a part of the Artemis generation. We really need you guys."

Beyond the prerequisites for becoming an astronaut and the intricacies of the Artemis program, Vanessa E. Wyche sheds light on broader aspects of NASA's vision and the impact of space research on our daily lives.

Wyche emphasizes the significance of collaboration and diversity in NASA's endeavors. "Diversity is critical for creativity," she states. Discussing efforts to promote diversity and inclusion, she highlights NASA's initiatives aimed at encouraging individuals from underrepresented groups to pursue careers in STEM.

As we embark on ambitious missions to explore the cosmos, embracing diverse perspectives becomes paramount in solving the complex challenges that lie ahead.

The Artemis program, with its focus on returning humans to the moon, represents just one chapter in NASA's broader narrative. Wyche envisions a future where human exploration extends beyond the moon, with Mars as the next frontier. She discusses the challenges inherent in planning missions to Mars, emphasizing the need for advancements in technology and the unwavering commitment of scientists and engineers.

In our conversation, Wyche also touches on NASA's role in fostering international collaboration. She underscores the importance of working hand in hand with other space agencies globally, recognizing that the challenges of space exploration are universal. As humanity looks to the stars, partnerships with nations around the world become instrumental in realizing shared dreams of exploring the cosmos.

As NASA aims to land the first woman on the moon's surface, the Artemis program serves as a beacon of inspiration for aspiring scientists, particularly young women, to pursue careers in STEM. Wyche's journey from a project engineer to the director of the Johnson Space Center serves as a testament to the possibilities that unfold when curiosity meets determination.

In conclusion, Vanessa E. Wyche's insights provide a comprehensive view of NASA's multifaceted mission. From the rigorous selection of astronauts to the intricacies of lunar

and Martian exploration, the space agency's endeavors reflect the boundless curiosity that drives humanity to reach for the stars. As we stand on the brink of a new era in space exploration, one thing remains clear: the pursuit of knowledge, fueled by curiosity, will continue to propel us.

Student Name: Julia Arrazolo  
Grade: 10  
School: Logos Prep Academy Primary Camp  
Title: white clovers  
Category: Poetry  
Key: Silver Key  
Educator:

i said i'd send poetry,  
but nothing seemed  
good or complete enough  
for you to see or listen to.  
and drivin' through Bellaire so many afternoons,  
wanted to knock on your front door and  
surprise you.

but i need you to know now,  
as you're turning 16,  
i hope it feels like winter or spring -

because i'm still gathering faded flowers from us -  
memories we dropped  
along the way.  
they're like pressed white clovers in my mind.  
in my mind they'll stay.

and i'm still thinking about paper swans,  
your man on a bench and  
rained-on tongues,

and that one time i facetimed you.  
it's been 9 years since those holy moments in first grade, when  
Whitman let us walk to the courtyard bathrooms.

even though you're 16,  
sometimes i wish we were still little girls.

when you told me you needed a sinus surgery,  
you asked your mom if she'd let you get a button nose.  
i remember thinking, "why would she  
change her face?"  
but in your eyes, there's  
still an armory of laughter  
i hold close.

so i want you to know now,  
you were the lifeline thrown to me,  
and i still dream of you and me.

as we're holding our sides, crackin' up on the green,  
and in basketball one-on-one's,  
you'd unbutton your blouse  
underneath that same faded hoodie.  
you were with me through the ups and downs -  
from the glow of innocence,  
to the shades of blues of  
growing up,  
before the silent afternoons stopped

making sense.

your apathy was something i couldn't  
fix.

you could tell when i wasn't okay and  
i could tell when you were  
insensate.

i still think about you most days  
and we'll both be okay.

i mean i pray  
we'll both be okay.

as we took a last picture together -  
bright white and  
forest green dresses,  
my goodbye eyes were  
glassy and  
tethered

to every embrace i could get.  
you made 8 years 16 times better.  
in the houston heat,  
a glass of cool night air,  
with that same messy bun and  
black converse,  
wild moonlight in your heart and  
hair.

and the love you showed me was  
so tangible, from

crying shoulder to shoulder on the  
bus ride to the Marriott in  
5th grade, to  
crying in your lap in  
8th.

i'll remember you when i  
graduate.

happy birthday,  
by the way.

Student Name: Ava Schwausch  
Grade: 8  
School: River Oaks Baptist School  
Title: Feather  
Category: Personal Essay & Memoir  
Key: Silver Key  
Educator: Chelsea Reynolds

DINGALING! A small golden bell swayed on the doorframe above, signaling our arrival. I glanced at the noise, the scratched bell rubbing against the peeling paint of the door, leaving a small crescent of eroded wood behind like a moon against a foggy midnight sky of peeling paint, proving that we are not the first to open the door and chime the bell. "Welcome!" exclaimed the man behind the counter. My mom ushered me inside the old building, shutting the sunny, humid day out behind her. The man gave us a friendly smile, equipped with two parrots atop his shoulders, like a wizard or an eager pirate on Halloween, flashing a silly smile and puppy eyes at the candy dealers. I ducked behind my mom's floral coral sundress as she strolled up to the counter. "Hello, we're looking for a pet for her," my mom stepped out of the way, her flowing dress following, revealing me. I let out a shy smile along with a wave. "Okay! How about..." Their conversation faded as I slipped away to peruse the collection of bird goods. The shelves were filled to the brim with all sorts of bird necessities. Mountains of bird kabobs and colorful grass-woven toys hung from hooks, toys that would make up a bird heaven. "Ava!" My mom's shout cut through my thoughts like the rising sun through the morning mist. I straightened at the call and jogged towards my mom, dodging a box of long bird treat sticks and large bird trees before following my mom into an adjoining room. My eyes flickered to a large sign plastered against the door, the poster was decorated with a bird silhouette foiled with a big red cross, reading BIRDS BITE in large, outlined, yellow letters. A shiver diffused down my spine. The man pushed the eroding wooden door open with a creak. The smell of musky vegetables, sunlight, dust, and a faint trace of bird manure blasted me in the face as the smelly air rushed through the open door like racers through a finish line ribbon. My mom's chin-length, blonde hair was frazzled, her long fingers held to her nose, evident that she too had been victim of the blast. "Sorry about the smell, you'll get used to it," he gave us an apologetic look, "all bird owners do." I flashed my mom a shy grin as if saying that I would get used to it if I adopted a pet parrot. We stepped down the chipped stone step onto the floor, littered with birdseed, hay, and debris. Rocks crunched under my once-white Crocs as I browsed the selection of birds. Cockatiels, macaws, and other colorful Aves tilted their feathered heads, beady eyes challenging me through the bars of their metal cages as I sauntered past. The noise of flapping feathers filled the air, luring

my eyes to the cage full of small, blue, and green-chested budgies. The playful parakeets tumbled from branch to branch, flapping wildly over each other in a feathered frenzy, soft under feathers drifted down like the snow we never got in Houston. I couldn't help but let out a giggle. The tall man's shadow fell over me as he too let out a chuckle, asking, "These are budgies, are you interested in them?" I opened my mouth to speak but was suddenly interrupted by a holler from my mom. "Ava! C'mere!" My feet turned in her direction, following my head. I glanced at the cages lining the narrow walkway before standing in front of a wall of boxy, rusted cages full of an assortment of small birds. My mom pointed at a peach-faced lovebird, asleep in an enclosure. The man launched into a whole lecture about lovebirds, surprisingly enough there wasn't one perching on his shoulder, seeing how much of a fanatic he was. I let out a sigh as I lazily scanned the cages until a beady black eye stared back at me, sparkling brown in the sun. The bird was small, about the size of my palm. Tan feathers lay flat against his smooth head, his under eyes blushing green. Small, tufted ruby plumes protruded from a small yet sturdy beige beak. Sleek, glistening emerald feathers caped his back, wings resembling a jade angel. Lush, flaming cherry tail feathers draped his behind, like a long wedding dress, worthy of the red carpet. A fiery sunset of plumages blazed upon his torso, a small yellow crest in the center, as if an accidental smudge of paint or pollen. The creature suddenly sneezed. The high-pitched sound and force caused the bird to jump, he rocked back and forth on his perch before shaking his feathers out, stabilizing himself. A wide smile formed upon my lips, a giggle following. My exclaim must've notified the adults, because they followed my gaze to the small cage containing the parrot. I felt my mom's warm palm grasp my bony, bare shoulder, her manicured nails resting against my skin. "Ah yes, our last pineapple green-cheeked conure," The man's hands casually rested on his hips. He reached between us before lifting the rusted, topaz-colored latch to open the enclosure. My mom and I stepped aside, observing him reach inside. "Step up!" He commanded, and the parrot obeyed, latching his talons onto the man's large hand without any thought. The bird perched atop the man's finger before me, glancing from his owner to me. The assistant nodded in the direction of my finger, and I cautiously laid it out. My lean index finger stuck out like a wooden wand, pointing at the man's chest as I closed my eyes, bracing myself for the hefty talons to sink into my skin. The weight atop my finger was less than expected, and so was the pain. I opened my eyes to peek at the parrot, he cocked his head like a new puppy, curious. I smiled once more as I held my new friend up to my eye level, and if parrots could smile, he definitely was. Maybe it's the little knowing glint in his eye that gives him away.

The cage rattled as the thick, black wheels of the truck bounced up and down atop the dry asphalt road. My family and I have traveled this road to Austin many times, but it was my bird's first. I peered down at Jordan in his blue carrier cage, clinging to the metal bars of the side like white cat fur to a black sweater. He rocked back and forth with his eyes closed, still pressed against the side, his feathers poking through the bars. I leaned in and

draped my body against the top, the thin handle poking me in the chest. Suddenly, a warm liquid splattered my cheek. Instinctively, I sat up and pressed my thumb against my cheek to wipe it off. There, on my thumb, was a yellow paste. I glanced from the substance to Jordan, who was now ruffling his feathers. "Jordan threw up," I cried to my parents in the front seat. "Oh Jordan... we're almost there" My voice was laced with worry; I stuck my nail through the top, petting his head gently. I cooed words of encouragement to him, as he does to me. This would be a long car ride.

"Ava! A-Ava!" My sister's usually cheery voice was alarmingly frightened, I could hear her cries and gasps for air even from the bedroom down the hallway. I normally would've grumbled a "whaaaat" at her call, but it was different this time. "It's Jordan!" My bare feet thudded on the plush, tan carpet of our room. I bounded down the small set of stairs, sweaty feet slapping against the wooden floor, my heart racing faster than a racehorse, nearing the finish line. I skidded to a stop at his eerily quiet cage. The air was thick and heavy like syrup. The only sound was the cage door clanking open as I reached inside. While I groped, my fingers grazed his soft, warm body on the floor of his cage where only his droppings belonged. I bit my tongue, willing away a wail. Salted tears blurred my vision. I held his limp carcass in my cupped hands. I could smell his signature warm scent still. My eyes couldn't bear to glance at his neck that was now snapped back in an unnatural manner. My hands held his motionless body against my beating heart, my chest rose and fell. All was quiet. A single tear slipped down my cheek, landing on his once beating heart.

I stared at my phone. My thumb labored, swiping whenever the YouTube Short didn't satisfy me. It was ineffectual work. I glanced up lazily when my eyes locked. I realized I was staring at his picture. Jordan's. The audio of the video became muffled, simply a mere background noise, merging with the screeches and honks of the cars racing along the busy corner outside that I have grown used to. The crimson tail feather within the frame lassoed my stare, hurling me deep into the memory. I was transported to the car, leaving Austin behind. I could feel the coffee leather seats, wrinkled with the burden of memories, beneath my thighs. My heart clenched as I relived the emptiness I felt not only in my lap, but in my heart. I miss the heaviness of his cage, pressing into my skin, giving me pattern leg. I remember being in bed that first night, lying in bed, eyes wide open, expecting his sweet goodnight murmurs, only to be answered with rap music blasted by a car outside. I was overwhelmed with sadness, knowing that I would never hear him again. I even longed for his squawks and screeches like a baby's cry when I left the room, or he wanted something. He was my little baby. I failed him. At once I could feel the cold rain pouring down, puddling at my feet as I stood before his grave. A ray of sun peeked through the clouds, illuminating the flowers resting at his grave. My mind took me back to my room, I could feel Jordan's beak as he pinched my scalp, the pull of my hair as he

nestled into it, making a bird's nest out of it, his breath in my ear as he nibbled on it, his sharp talons on my finger and shoulder, that I never thought I would miss. The warm scent of Jordan filled the air, the blanket engulfing me, my legs dangling from the bed as I poured my heart out to him, the only one I could talk to, the room dark, one of many late-night therapy sessions, only he and the moon listening in. I remember the kisses we would exchange as I left for school. I could hear the blare of the vacuum as my mom cleaned the floor beneath his cage, stained with blackberry bits. The memory of watching him throw blackberry everywhere triggered a small smile to form on my face. Instead of shedding tears of sadness, they were now tears of joy, tears of appreciation, tears of love. I could feel the cold drops of water splattering on my skin as he took a bath. My wide smile, the excitement we shared after a long day of school. Now that intense sadness has morphed into gratitude. Gratitude for what he has taught me, not only responsibility, but true, undying love, and vulnerability, during those late nights. He was the one I could come to, he would always be eager to listen, even if he could not respond. Now when I see that feather, I smile, my heart swelling with gratitude for the way he changed my life.

Student Name: Morgan Norris  
Grade: 8  
School: River Oaks Baptist School  
Title: My Grandmother's Legacy  
Category: Personal Essay & Memoir  
Key: Silver Key  
Educator: Chelsea Reynolds

### A Grandmother's Legacy

Ring ring! Every Sunday, she calls me and tells me "Eat, Morgan, eat!" For emphasis, she sometimes repeats the same thing but in Korean "Man-ee muh-guh!" When we are together, cooking and feeding me is how she shows me her love. Her imperfect grammar makes her kind tone of voice sound even softer. The deep wrinkles around her eyes testify to her difficult life as a child and the challenges she faced as an immigrant in America. She is petite in height from years of malnutrition as she grew up poor, but she is a role model I look up to. Through her stories of struggle, she learned how to live with gratitude, independent of life's circumstances. By her example, my grandmother has instilled in me the virtues of gratitude and resilience.

Born in North Korea, she and her family fled to South Korea when she was young. During the journey, her mother sprained her ankle on a slippery rock and needed to stay behind temporarily. My grandmother was four years old when she traveled with a smuggler who promised to take her to South Korea. My grandmother was terrified to leave her mother. Time crawled but eventually, my grandmother was reunited with her family. My grandmother's gratitude towards this man has left an impression on her life because when she sees anyone in need, she gives generously because she remembers how he helped her. Her story reminds me to always be grateful and remember there are good people in the world.

Unfortunately, it was not long before tragedy struck. When seven years old, my grandmother's father died from a sudden heart attack. As the runt of the litter, my grandmother did not grow like her older siblings, and she often got sick. She did her best in school, but often fainted from malnutrition as food was scarce. One day, my grandmother and her sister were sent to sell a few potatoes after school to feed the family. The savory aroma of baked potatoes made her stomach howl with hunger. With eyes darting around to see if anyone was watching, she slowly began pinching off small bites off the ends of the potatoes. Soon the potatoes were too small to sell, and she returned home ashamed of letting her mother down. The lack of food during her

childhood was traumatic for my grandmother and explains why she always gives me plenty of food to eat.

My grandmother dreamed of a better life and heard there were delicious kinds of food in America. She excelled in school and earned a scholarship at a college in Memphis, Tennessee. This was her dream but moving to a foreign country with a new language was hard. With a heavy accent, she faced discrimination. She wanted to become an accountant but failed the examination twice. Many people would have quit but she was persistent as a salmon swimming upstream. On her third attempt, she passed her exam and was hired by a company where she worked for thirty years. Her determination to push past her father's loss, constant hunger, and academic setbacks has taught me that no obstacle is insurmountable.

I can relate to my grandmother because of various challenges in my own life. I have been bullied in school, received disappointing grades, and done things I regret. This sounds like I should be unhappy, but that is not entirely true. Each obstacle had good things come out of it. For example, when I was bullied, I met loyal friends who came to my defense, or when I had a bad grade, I was proud when I raised the grade by working harder. My grandmother reminds me that I am unique and build character when faced with difficulties. She has overcome a lot in her life and believes that I can do the same. Every time I open one of my grandmother's letters, I feel grateful for her encouraging words and unconditional love. Behind her humble size, gray hair, and soft voice, lies the strength of an army.

If a stranger were to meet my eight-three-year-old grandmother, they would see someone that is full of energy and joy. She may be only four feet and ten inches, and weigh ninety-two pounds, but her presence is the loudest in the room. No one would imagine how she struggled so much in her life. She dresses in clothes that she buys from a resale store yet lavishes gifts on others. There is a warmth to her letters that bridges the miles between us. Her ability to persist through life's difficulties and grow stronger inspires me to do the same. She teaches me to never give up. Life will always have challenges, but our responses to them reveal our character. My grandmother's life is a reminder to approach each day with gratitude and to view setbacks as opportunities for growth. I carry these lessons with me as her legacy continues to shape my character and influence the way I view life.

Student Name: Emma Ahuja  
Grade: 8  
School: River Oaks Baptist School  
Title: My Home Away from Home  
Category: Personal Essay & Memoir  
Key: Silver Key  
Educator: Chelsea Reynolds

A

year ago, I would have never imagined staying with a host family 6,419 miles away from my home. This summer I got the

opportunity to go to Chiba, Japan and stay with a host family. I am so grateful for my host family because they taught me so many lessons and made me feel like a part of their family. The main lesson my host family taught me was to appreciate the small courtesies that people do for you. Those tiny details that often go unnoticed are much more impactful than they seem. During the trip, my host family was filled with kindness which resulted in me feeling appreciated and welcomed to their family. On the first night with my host family, they took me to their favorite local restaurant which caused us to bond and allowed me to feel more comfortable staying with them.

My host sister, Sara, told me that “we are going to show you our favorite local barbecue restaurant.” I was extremely excited because I love Japanese and Korean barbecue restaurants. Once it was time to go, we put our shoes on and headed outside where it was quiet and perfectly chilly. The restaurant was close, so we decided to walk there together. After a few minutes of talking, we arrived at the restaurant. Immediately after we stepped through the doors, I could smell and hear sizzling meat. Once we sat down, my host family showed me the menu and told me about the items they recommended. We ordered some starters and then picked a soup and a type of rice to go along

with our main course. Sara recommended the nori rice which had shredded seaweed, green onions, and sesame seeds. We both ordered the nori rice and got miso soup to pair with it. My host family decided to order a combination of their favorite meats for our main course. While we waited for the food to arrive Sara and her family helped me pick out the sauces that they recommended with the meal. Eventually, a giant platter of an assortment of raw meats arrived. One of them was cow tongue. I was skeptical at first, but the cow tongue ended up tasting incredible and was even better with some rice and sauce. The table had a grill right in the middle so we could grill our own food. The rice, meat, and sauce combinations were so delicious that I wished I could savor it forever. It was one of the best tasting barbecues I have ever had. The experience of grilling your own food at the table was entertaining as well. Once we finished eating, we walked back to their house. I am grateful that my host family shared one of their favorite restaurants with me.

It was the next morning with my host family, and we were getting ready for breakfast. I helped my host mother prepare yogurt by cutting plums that their grandfather grew, placing banana and golden kiwi slices on the yogurt, and topping it off with mixed nuts. While I set up the yogurts, my host mother prepared a nutritious breakfast for everyone. The breakfast she made was a warm, golden-brown toasted ham and cheese sandwich, sliced Japanese scrambled eggs, fresh tomato and cucumber slices, and lettuce topped with micro-greens. My host family has their own personal chopsticks that they use during their meals, therefore they decided to get me my own pair of chopsticks. My host family knew about my love for cats; so, they made me personalized chopsticks that had a picture of a cat drawn on them. The chopsticks also have my name printed on it in Japanese with gold letters. I was thankful that they put in the time and thought to buy and customize specially made chopsticks for me. I appreciated the effort put in to know my interests so the chopsticks would feel special to me.

In the summer, Japan is known for having firework festivals, like America's fourth of July. My host family bought a set of different firecrackers for me and Sara to light up in their driveway. My host family's grandfather lives beside them, therefore, they invited him over to light firecrackers with us. In Japan during the festivals, there is a common summer outfit worn called a yukata, as a result my host family let me wear one of their yukatas. It was comfortable and felt like a soft cloth on my body. It was lightweight, so it was perfect for a warm summer night. The yukata I wore was a deep navy blue with a vibrant, abstract butterfly print. Alongside the yukata, my host mother put my hair into a tight bun. After my host sister and I were dressed we went onto their driveway to start the firecrackers. Sara and I started to light the firecrackers and waved them around in the dark night sky. It was like playing with wands of sparkling fire. While we lit up the firecrackers, we also picked some of their grandfather's plums to eat. The plums were juicy and sweet with a slight tartness. We ate the plums as we spent time together until we finished using all the firecrackers. Afterwards, we celebrated my host father's 50<sup>th</sup> birthday. I was glad that my host family included me in celebrating their own traditions. I was able to experience their culture and felt more welcome into their family as I made precious memories with them.

I was so grateful to be able to experience and join this program because I got to meet my host family and make long-lasting relationships. At the same time, I created many core memories and experienced a new perspective on life. These significant experiences with my host family taught me many important lessons. Appreciating the things that people do for me is the most impactful lesson that I learned during this trip. Now that I am back in Houston, I can apply what I learned into my day-to-day life by appreciating the sacrifices everyone does for me. I will be grateful for even the smallest and

most ignored things because they all add up to something more meaningful.

Student Name: Riley Clarke  
Grade: 8  
School: River Oaks Baptist School  
Title: Small Moments; Great Happiness  
Category: Personal Essay & Memoir  
Key: Silver Key  
Educator: Chelsea Reynolds

“Be appreciative of the small moments, you never know how impactful it might be in the future.” This is a piece of advice that my role model shared with me. A role model is someone who inspires you to imitate their good behavior and actions. They influence every decision you make and are there for you through everything. For me, this person is my grandmother.

Brown hair, red lipstick, soft spoken, calm, patient – these are some words that I would use to describe my grandmother. This is a woman who has inspired me to do something great one day and to never give up trying. Although she has persevered through many hardships during her life, her good attitude has never been unwavering. Always looking at the positive, her perspective lights up our moments shared together, making every experience with her feel like a warm embrace. She never lets me down, always eager to spend time with me. This woman has taught me many of the impacting life lessons I have learned today, and I will never forget the impact she has made on me. This is a story about one small moment that caused me to realize how much I need to appreciate my time with her.

The sun was blinding me as I arose out of bed. I swung open my bedroom door, attempting not to wake up my sister sleeping in the bed next to me. I walked down the warm stairs, as the sun was beaming on them, still rising. As I walked through the familiar hallway, past my grandparents closed bedroom door, the elevator, double doors that lead outside, the bathroom, and eventually the set dining table, ready for breakfast. Finally, into the kitchen where my grandparents are already making breakfast.

“Good morning!” My grandmother said as she pulled the crispy bacon out of the warm oven, the smell filled the room. My grandfather, cooking the eggs for his famous breakfast tacos he had made so many times before, gave me a hug and greeted me, asking me if I was hungry for breakfast.

“Riley, would you like to make brownies with me today?” My grandmother asked me after I had eaten my breakfast. I told her I would love to I just needed to get dressed quickly. I ran upstairs to tell Sam and George to get dressed and ready for the day so we can make brownies with Bebe. They jumped out of bed and threw on their familiar bathing suits, T-shirts, and Crocs. I tip-toed into my room, still trying my hardest to not

wake up my sister, as she was still asleep in her bed. As I walked into the kitchen, I noticed my grandmother had already laid out all the ingredients and her old recipe book, passed down from generation to generation. My cousins and I washed our hands and started laughing about something Sam had done. We all got assigned a job, measuring the flour, mixing the wet ingredients, or pouring the final product into the pan.

After the ingredients had been mixed, stirred, combined, and poured, we placed the brownies in the oven, attempting to not burn ourselves, and waited for the ever so long 15 minutes to pass.

“Beep, beep, beep!!” The oven rang as the timer finished and the brownies were ready to be taken out of the oven. My grandmother grabbed her heat-protectant gloves and took the pan out of the oven. My cousins and I, giggling behind her, bumped into her and almost burned her with the hot pan. My grandmother jumped out of the way and scolded us for being so crazy at a time like this. Though she didn’t get hurt, she could have, and my cousins and I would have been so mad at ourselves, as we never want to hurt someone we love so dearly. I hate it when my grandmother gets mad at me because I know that’s not the kind of person she is, and she never wants to yell at us.

Although this memory seems so insignificant, it taught me that even small things like baking brownies with your grandmother and cousins can affect someone’s everyday life. Had I never said yes when my grandmother asked me to help her make this tasty treat, I never would’ve had this life experience and spent this memorable time with my family. My grandmother recently got diagnosed with breast cancer for the 3<sup>rd</sup> time in her life. Even though I know she is incredibly tough and has been through this many times before, I am afraid these small memories might be all I have left of her soon. She might be one of the strongest women I know, but even things like this can be unbeatable.

For these small reasons and memories, I cherish the time I have with my grandmother, as I know it won’t last forever. The impact this woman has made on my life will always be there and influence every decision I make. She will always be the person I can lean on through anything, and never be disappointed in. She has a special place in my heart that can only be filled by her presence. Although she may not know how impactful she has been to me in my life, I have noticed and will forever be grateful for it.

Student Name: Vivian Connelly  
Grade: 8  
School: River Oaks Baptist School  
Title: The Color of Death  
Category: Short Story  
Key: Silver Key  
Educator: Chelsea Reynolds

It's the red hair that surprises the man. It's wild, with golden strands running through it, like fire. The girl herself seems bolder than her hair, taking one look at the old oak furniture, scattered books, and faded wallpaper before striding to the heavy curtains. She thrusts them open, letting the sun tumble through. It seems to agree with the girl, surrounding her in a warm light.

The man scowls at it. The sun does not agree with him. It waits for him behind his eyelids, haunting him. He can still feel its gaping maw licking his face hungrily, cracking his skin—

"Mr... Anderson." The girl is back in front of him, reading a clipboard through mascara-lined eyes. Her white rubber shoes seem out of place on the dusty floor. She presses her lips together, staring at his home with a raised eyebrow. The man pauses, then gestures with a heavy arm to a brown suitcase at the door. It slouches, melancholy seeping through its faded fabric. She sighs, reaching to grab it, then stares at him. At the folds of sorrow lining his forehead, the whisper of hair hovering around his head covered in spots, his pale eyes. He hunches in his chair, clothes hanging off his frail frame. He studies the heavy carpet before bringing his eyes to hers.

Her eyes are the not-quite-night shade, the farthest point in the ocean before it surrenders to the sky. The man used to love that color. He used to feel the wind on his face, its fingers playing with his rich dark hair. He used to be on a skyscraper that moved, one that sliced through the water like warm butter. The heavens and the oceans had blended, creating a blue-and-white sphere that encompassed him.

The girl's hair catches his eye again. That fire, burning the blue. Red had entered his blue-and-white world, with loud shouts and screams cut short. In seconds, the red had scorched and choked before it turned everything black. He glares at the hair.

The girl sighs again, louder this time, waiting. She moves her gaze around the room. There are pictures, too. Faded and cracked with time, they peek out from under papers or

books. The same man, his arm around a girl with curly hair, laughing. A boy, his chubby hands placed on the chair where his mother sits, imitating a serious father with a chest full of medals.

When the black receded, he was no longer on his skyscraper but clinging to wood, barely on top of the sea. His head hurt. The sea shifted, tossed, swelled, flowed, dragging him and his board with it, but he never was part of it. The sea knew he was unnatural. It wanted him out, gone. The feeling was mutual. He upended what little was left of his stomach.

Now his world was dark navy, except when he dangled his bare feet in the wetness and placed the back of his head on the wood. Then the world was a glossy black table that someone had sprinkled with sugar, and in that navy-and-black world he shut his eyes.

The girl looks at the man again. His eyes are glazed over, staring at her but not. She slowly moves, making her way through the dusty room. There are some newspapers – GERMANY INVADES POLAND screams out at her, then AMERICA AT WAR, ALLIES LAND IN FRANCE and one announcing with pride, JAPS QUIT, VICTORY FOR THE ALLIES. The girl turns from these and leafs through the nearest stack of papers.

When the man opened his eyes again, his sugar sprinkled navy-and-black world was gone. It was replaced by the blue-and-white one, the familiar one, but this world looked different without his skyscraper. Bluer. He rested his head on the wood again and stared up into the air, but it had changed. The sun inched its way up the sky, each step it took warming the man's face. At first, he welcomed it – the navy-and-black world was cold and wet. But when he'd dried the sun didn't stop. It climbed higher and higher until it was right on to top him, pressing him into the wood like an iron into his Navy uniform.

The papers are smooth beneath the girl's fingers. Old photos, documents. A child's handwriting, print, a formal typewritten letter. There's a paper that was torn, but clumsily taped back together. The girl catches the words outstanding bravery...admiration...thank...service. She pauses, looking back at the man, then gingerly places the paper down.

It continued in an uninterrupted circle, the cold darkness and the hungry white of the sun. It wanted him. Its fingers would first reach down and stroke his face, then would pull and scratch and tear, leaving him red and cracked wherever they touched. The man ripped off his shirt and covered his face with it, shut his eyes, inhaled the hot air. But the sun just moved to his torso, twisting and cracking and burning, burning, burning. The sun would eat up the blue and turn his world a blinding white. The hammer in his head banged harder.

His lips dried, and he wanted to drink the cool water, but the sea hated him and poisoned the water. He drank it anyway. The liquid was relief for a second, then it clawed at his throat and split his lips.

The white came for longer and longer until there was nothing but the man and the sun, the sun and the man. His world was white, but he didn't have a world, there was nothing beyond his dry throat and pounding head and red, peeling face. He opened his eyes and thought he saw something – the faint outline of a being, its hot breath on his cheek. He blinked and all he saw was white again.

The man was tired. He was ready to be done. But a shadow passed over his face, and he looked up in time to see a bird. Large, metal, unflapping with no feathers. It was the most beautiful bird the man had ever seen. It blocked out the white.

“Mr. Anderson.”

He opens his eyes. He looks at the girl, with her ocean and her fire. She is standing in front of him, her hands resting on his suitcase. On her chest the stitched words read Sunny Valley Senior Home. The words are neat and straight, like her uniform, but unforgiving. Her eyes are different, though – they hold a new light. She gazes at him with something...pity? No. Respect.

“Are you ready?” Her voice is soft.

He takes one last glance at the dusty room, nostalgia creeping into his throat. He swallows it and gazes out the window that the girl had thrust open. The white is fading away, covered by puffs that begin to rain. The water runs gently over the roof, washing the dirt and grime and memories onto the grass, the soil soaking them up.

The man gives the girl a tired smile.

“I'm ready.”

The USS Indianapolis was 186 meters long and weighed about 9950 tons. In late July 1945 the Indianapolis was sent on a high-speed voyage to deliver cargo to a U.S. air base Tinian. Unbeknownst to the crew, the cargo they were carrying was the vital components of the atomic bomb, "Little Boy". After safely delivering the cargo, the ship set out to San Francisco. Three days after they left Tinian, the Indy was torpedoed by a Japanese submarine a little while past midnight. The vast ship sank in 12 minutes. Out of the 1195 men aboard the ship, only 900 made it initially out of the ship. Each man or group of men, stranded in the ocean, believed he was the only survivor/s. The US Navy failed to realize that the ship had sunk. After four days of being slowly eaten by sharks, hunger, and heat, the men were finally rescued. Only 316 of the men were alive.

Student Name: Riley Canonico  
Grade: 8  
School: River Oaks Baptist School  
Title: The Dark Rabbit Hole  
Category: Personal Essay & Memoir  
Key: Silver Key  
Educator: Chelsea Reynolds

Lying is one of

the worst sins that a human can commit. Some people think that in certain circumstances lying is okay, but lying is never okay. The effects that lying causes are detrimental to not only you, but everyone else around you. I had to learn this lesson the hard way. My mom had to teach me this lesson, so that as I grew older, I would not lie. This moment impact one of the biggest impacts in my life and has shown me the dark rabbit hole that is lying.

It was a regular weekday night. I had done all my other homework, the only thing that I had left was a thirty-minute reading.

"Riley, I'm making dinner. Go read. I'll call you when dinner is ready," my mom told me in the most uninterested, monotone, and bland voice.

Me, being seven, and it being late I was less than thrilled at having to do more work, but my mom had that look that all mom's get when they want you to do something, and she is daring you to argue. That look was all I needed to move as fast as I could up our old, carpeted stairs. Once I hit the half point in the stairs, I waited for a breath as I viewed the downstairs of our small townhome. From my vantage point I could see every pale-yellow wall and ceramic tile that made up the

first floor. Begrudgingly, I trudged up the warn carpet stairs to my thirty-minute torture chamber. I entered my room and went to my meager library that contained only a couple chapter books that were on my level. Most of these books had been read multiple times when I was younger and were layered in wear and tear. I had one book that I brought from my school, but the thought of reading that book made these minutes seem like years. It was one of those books with a start that made a sloth seem lightning fast and I was not interested in dealing with that. The book that I not so smartly chose was extremely under my level. I had been sleeping in the spare bedroom in our townhome because my stepbrother was staying at our house. He and my stepdad came every other month (before their house flooded and they moved in permanently) stayed about a week and then went back to their house. When my stepbrother came, he would get to sleep in my small, cozy, and arm room and I would be banished to the smaller and less personal room. The room had been converted into a giant closet for some of my mom's clothes. I

was sleeping on a cot by the only window in the room. The thing is the window did not look out onto the street or some other pretty view. It was just looking at a ten-ish tall hole in the ceiling that had a glass pane at the top that was supposed to be a sky hole, but we never cleaned the glass, so there was a level of moss or algae coating the edges. With the moss on the glass light could still come through you just couldn't see out. With the light from the window and my fan I began to read my book. The book that if anyone were to know would get me killed of embarrassment. The minutes ticked by. Each one slower than the next. Finally, I heard my saving grace.

The call of my mom saying, "Riley dinner's ready! Come downstairs"!

The glee that I experienced was unimaginable. For a second grader that had been doing homework for the past hour, the limited freedom of having the ability to go downstairs was second to none.

I flew down the stairs as fast as I could. Each stair creates a thump thump thump. I had abandoned the book in my room as I went to dinner. Before we ate my mom told me to write in my assignment page the title and the author. I ran upstairs again to grab a book that was not the one I had originally read. Instead of choosing

one long chapter book that I was going to pretend to have read I chose a book of short stories. That meant that each individual chapter was written by a separate

author. The space I was given to write the authors was not that big and was meant for one or perhaps two not six or seven authors, since that was the amount of the stories I had lied to my mom about reading. My mom made me eat the now lukewarm dinner before we would figure out what to do about writing the authors names. The initial freedom I felt when I had come flying down those stairs was quickly being overshadowed by a new emotion. Guilt. The guilt that I had lied. The guilt of having been tempted to enter the dark rabbit hole. The pressure to make things right. Finally, I broke. After dinner I told my mom that I had not read the short story book, but that I had lied. Rightly my mom was more the mad. She told me to go upstairs and get the book I had originally read. With a guilty heart and a heavy head, I made my way to get the book. The book I had chosen to read was meant to be read to children that were younger than four. The book I had chosen was The Berenstain Bears. When I came back downstairs I had more than enough time to realize when I ventured downstairs I would be in big trouble. I was not wrong. When my mom found out I believe she was more disappointed than anything. Disappointed that I had lied. Disappointed that I had read a book that was way under my level. All that dissatisfaction came out as frustration because not only did she ground me, but she also made me go sit on the stairs for a timeout. Even though I was a guilty eight-year-old, I was still stubborn and that one stubborn part of me reared my head and said, "NO"! Then the battle of wills began, my mom getting more and more frustrated the longer this went on. Finally, a decision had to be made, either she or I would sit on the stairs. I told her it would be her. She did not get mad but claimed that we needed a break from each other

and instead of getting mad she went and sat on the stairs. There was a small moment of satisfaction that I made her sit on the stairs before I begin feeling bad. I do not know if she was using reverse psychology or if I was just too guilty, but I started bawling my eyes out. This was not the standard bawling this was a violent, wet, maelstrom of big fat tears. Not only did I bawl my eyes out, but I also began begging her to come off the stairs and switch with me. She held out strong and refused my every plea. Eventually when I had cried my last tears and given up the fight, I chose to take a different

route to get my mother off the stairs. I climbed just behind my mom on the next step gently sat down and waited. And waited. And waited. Finally, my mom got up, looked at me and then commanded me, "Riley stay where you are do not get up. I will call you when you can get up." The disappointment in her eyes was unmistakable. It was a look that was as old as time. A look that felt as if it was not just staring at who you thought you were, but who you are in the deepest corners of your soul. A look that could silence armies or level towns. In my childhood most of the times I received The Look it was on my friend and my enemy: The Stairs.

This time was no exception. The stairs that had been a passageway from one mistake to another were now a place to reminisce and realize what I had done wrong and how to fix it. I was at this place when understanding dawned upon me. Lying is a rabbit hole that at first look appears shallow and inconsequential, but the longer the trail goes the darker and deadly the turns become. My mother reinforced this idea when I got off the stairs. She sat me down and gave me a lecture that explained everything that lying could, would, and will happen to people. This may not be a deep and life changing experience that some people get after a life-threatening accident, but this is a story that has stayed with me throughout my life, and I reflect on every time I even think about lying.

Student Name: Bella Phan  
Grade: 8  
School: River Oaks Baptist School  
Title: The eventful day with my grandma  
Category: Personal Essay & Memoir  
Key: Silver Key  
Educator: Chelsea Reynolds

Mentors are people you admire and strive to become, and they teach you throughout your life. Those teachings will help you in your day-to-day life, and without them, you would not have any ambitions in your life. My mentor is my grandma, and without her teachings, I would not be who I am now. During her birthday party, she taught me that my life was controlled by me and only me and that I should welcome new challenges in life. Now because of her, whenever I try a new opportunity, I look at it with a positive point of view.

It was the weekend, when I went over to her house to celebrate her birthday with all my relatives. I was nervous of seeing all the relatives whom I have not seen in ages, pondering on whether I should talk with them. In the past, whenever I tried to talk to them or to socialize with them, my pitiful attempts usually ended up with the awkward silence in the room. The last time I saw them was around three months ago, and so it seemed like an eternity. When I entered grandma's house, the scent from assortment of Asian cuisines hit you in the face instantly, each food smell is vastly different, varying from spicy food to sweet desserts. All the familiar fragrances danced on the tip of my nose, while I tried to locate and remember the dish which they belonged to. The house was filled with many cousins, uncles and aunts, that I dreaded meeting. Then Grandma's gentle, and loving voice welcomed us at the door when we entered the house. Her hair color was brown like chocolate, and on that day, she put it up. Her skin tone showed evidence that she had been in the sun a lot of times. She was a little taller than five feet, which was about my height. She welcomed me with a nice warm hug, and her hug was comforting, because it was comfortable. It helped lighten my irritable mood arising from waking up in the car after a long car ride. Her smile was like the rays of the sun coming out after a storm. After her greetings, she offered us to help ourselves with food at the party. My grandma cooked most of the dishes there, and she was immensely proud of that fact. Since it was an hour drive to get here to this party, I was obviously famished. So, I brought up the courage to face the embarrassment of being late and anxiety of talking to different relatives.

Eventually, I ended up joining the table of young people who were already eating. There, all my cousins sat quietly eating their lunch. Once everyone finished eating to their content, we went to the park across the street. That day the weather was pleasant. The

temperature was in the sixties and seventies, and the sun was in the middle of the sky, smiling down upon us. The park was like a desert, with no one in sight. I guess there were not that many kids living in this neighborhood. My cousins and I played all types of fun games, including a short volleyball game, until our legs wanted to fall off and our lungs were gasping for air. Then we decided to play Frisbee. I ran to fetch the Frisbee disc, but I had to cross the road. On normal days, I would be extremely careful, but that day I was too ecstatic to play at the park. So, I ran across the street without first looking for cars. Then I heard my grandma shout, "Watch out!" Before I could register what she was saying I heard a loud Honk. Before I could turn around, someone's hand had reached out and grabbed me by the shoulder to save me from being hit by the car. It all went by in 5 seconds, but it was one of the most impactful moments in my life. I did not realize back then that I should have been grateful for being saved and getting to see another day instead of being stubborn.

After that I ended up getting an earful of scolding from grandma, and that was one of the few moments that I have seen my grandma so angry at me. Though back then I was really annoyed why she was so upset, I now understand where her anger came from. Grandma scolded, "You almost got hit, and I would have had to take you to the hospital!" From that moment I realized two important things. One was that I should appreciate everything in my life to the fullest, and two ways that I should look at everything in a positive mindset. After that traumatic day, I became more thankful for everything around me, and I tried out new things more often than I used to.

My grandma has taught me a lot of life lessons, and I will always be in debt to her and her teachings. Being grateful for the things in my life and looking at life with a positive attitude are the two most important things that she has taught me. Sadly, she is getting old, and she also lives far away. Occasionally, she will drive an hour to drop off delicious Asian food at my house. Her visits are always welcomed and enjoyed each time by me. I think without her lessons I would not be who I am today.

Student Name: Noah selouan  
Grade: 8  
School: River Oaks Baptist School  
Title: The Tropical Tree  
Category: Personal Essay & Memoir  
Key: Silver Key  
Educator: Chelsea Reynolds

"More, give the plants more  
water."

"But Jedo, they have enough  
water. If I give them more they might die."

"No, no" my grandpa  
responded through his thick Lebanese accent, "they are thirsty so let them  
drink."

I aimed the decayed, broken, dark  
blue hose towards the small fig tree and with a "psssshhh" an unsteady stream  
of water was released, whilst doing so the water found its way through the  
porous hose and onto me. Small streams trickled down my leg, where they found  
their way between my toes, cooling my feet from the scorching rocks, still warm  
from the last light of this warm and humid summer day. As the uneven stream  
continued to spew, water began to collect at the base of the plant indicating  
that the soil had taken more water than it could hold. I always felt as though Jedo  
overwatered the  
plants, but to me, it didn't matter, I enjoyed gardening because of the time

spent with him and not the actual planting. Of course, it was fun and rewarding to watch my crops grow but it wouldn't matter if Jedo wasn't there to watch them grow with me.

"Put the water on that one," he ordered and pointed to a minuscule yet healthy-looking tropical plant, concealed in the thick foliage of fruit trees and plants surrounding it. I had never paid any attention to the small shrub or had any knowledge of planting it.

"What's that?" I inquired.

"I found that plant when we first came to this house. I do not know who planted it but I took care of it,"

"Oh," I responded while simultaneously turning the worn-down tip of the nozzle towards the small yet elegant shrub. It reminded me of our neighbor's tropical tree. It appeared practically identical to ours however it was much larger and had a beautiful disposition and was a complex shelter for all sorts of awe-inspiring creatures. Bees would nestle between the large palm leaves building small nests while squirrels turned to it as refuge from the relentless hail and rain. Would this runt of a plant that sat before me someday flourish into the masterpiece that lie on the other side of the fence. "This plant is my favorite." my grandpa stated, breaking my train of thought. For some strange reason, I

quickly developed a love for the small tropical tree. It grabbed my attention and made me stare as if it was an elegant work of art. When in reality, it was nothing more than an ordinary shrub. "Me too Jedo."

There was a sharp chilliness to the air. The concrete below me hardened and froze causing a tingling sensation to erupt in my bare feet. Every breath I took stung my nostrils like a thousand needles as gusts of freezing air would rush in. In hindsight, I should have worn a coat but I was just going outside for a second to check on my crops. It wasn't worth getting a coat. I walked down the numbingly cold concrete path and took a sharp turn going behind the garage. This is where my feet were greeted with the familiar cold gravel that spread out every inch of the garden and my eyes were greeted with a sight that almost brought me to my knees. My heart jumped in my throat and my eyes started to swell as I shockingly gazed upon the once beautiful garden. Everything was dead. Tomato plants that had once towered above all else now lay slumped over and decayed. My favorite fig tree was reduced to a blackened and shriveled stick with no leaves. The cold freeze swept over the garden like a hurricane. Killing everything it touched along the way. Everything me and my grandpa had worked for months to build was torn apart and destroyed.

"Noah, can you come here for a second?" my mother asked in a calm and quiet voice.

"Yeah, what is it?" I asked, a bit

worried by my mother's tone.

"I know this might come as a shock," She started, "but Jedo passed away last night," Her words cut into me like a thousand daggers stabbing into every inch of my body. The gravitas of what my mother had just told me shocked me to the point that I couldn't even process the words exiting her mouth. I felt light, I didn't feel anything, I didn't cry, I didn't get upset. I saw myself walk towards my room, too shocked to control my thoughts or actions. As if watching from the view of a bystander I watched as Noah walked into his room and closed the door. At this definitive moment, everything came crashing down.

Months had passed since the death of Jedo, I thought I had gotten over my grief and moved on but every time someone brought up his name all the memories and sharp stinging emotions came rushing back like a tidal wave. Everything felt a bit surreal, as if he was still alive, someday I still expect him to be working in the garden or greet me with a warm hug and wide smile. But he never did. I hadn't touched a plant since he had passed, in fact, I hadn't even looked at a plant. It was too painful, too lonely without him. However, on this particular day, some strange feeling compelled me to check on the garden.

There was a lukewarm and mild sensation to the air. The cold winter breeze still present but with it came a new warmth, the warmth of spring. I walked down the fresh concrete, void

of the chilling cold of winter. I took in a deep breath, relishing in the crispness of the air. The scent of soil was eminent and with it came the memories. However this time they were not sad but happy. Instead of focusing on what I had lost, I felt a sense of gratitude, gratitude for the time I was given and the experiences I was lucky enough to share with Jedo. And as I took a sharp turn behind the garage, I was greeted with a sign that almost brought me to my knees. My grandpa's once small and trivial tropical plant had erupted into a towering and majestic tree, a tree so beautiful, it put our neighbors to shame.

Student Name: Sophia Bellard

Grade: 11

School: St Agnes Academy

Title: "It Will Always be Houston or Nowhere"

Category: Poetry

Key: Silver Key

Educator:

Melting pot, melting down, welder of my soul

You have accepted me, loved me fiercely with gentle

Varicolored hands intimately stretching gauze over the wounds of misconceptions, of confusion, of unwillingness to understand – what it is that I am, why I look as I do

I have slipped – fallen – tripped over hatred, over prejudice – it is you that has placed arms of equality under my ashy knees, around my curved shoulders, lifted me up and showed me to the sun – said, Look! She is beautiful!

Never have you bitten your tongue – you defend me with years of ancestry between your knuckles and powerful strikes of unity to the jaded face of racism

Never have you allowed shadows of hostility to dwarf me – encompass me – choke me, neck pinned to the ground, so that I could not breathe

A powerful protector lifting me up – up out of the drowning, ferocious waters of self-doubt, resuscitating me with wisdom

Houston, I breathe, thank you

Your diversity is living, gasping within me, lovingly tracing my heritage, kissing my crown of curls, validating the two-tone color of my skin – allowing me to live as equal, to proudly proclaim – I am who I am! I belong!

My porous bones no longer ache under the weight of uncertainty, no longer creak when I defend myself – I am bursting, radiant, robust with the possibility of change – standing proudly – I am the horsemen of justice

Houston, you and I, hand gripping hand, are rising against the hypocrisies of society

Houston, you are a melting pot, melting down into my soul – branding the importance of who I am into my tender being, ripe with the promise of acceptance, blazing with a fire of oneness

Student Name: Ivy Hu  
Grade: 9  
School: St Agnes Academy  
Title: A Skilled Cook  
Category: Humor  
Key: Silver Key  
Educator:

Luka sat silently in front of the bowl of wax-like substance with a very questionable color and an extremely poor aroma that he had created moments ago, in an unsuccessful attempt to make breakfast.

He stared very intensely, so much so that it was unfortunate he lacked a microscope in his kitchen. Luka had faith in himself and shoved a large spoonful into his mouth.

Then spat it out immediately, desperately gasping and choking, and washed his mouth out with water. But he was begrudgingly aware that his tastes in food are a little..bizarre, so he marched to his father's room and unceremoniously kicked the door down with no regard at all toward its rusting hinges. "I need you to taste-test something for me," Luka demanded and presented his creation.

(His father wordlessly lamented the loss of his perfectly functional door, which had successfully kept out all unwanted intruders until this moment.)

"What is this?" He scrutinized the bowl of misshapen lumps warily.

Luka shoved it further under his father's nose. "Scrambled eggs."

His father looked unconvinced but took a small, cautious bite anyway. After he chewed and swallowed, he stated with the epitome of a scandalized expression on his face: "This is the most abhorrent thing I have ever put into my mouth, and I don't know how I feel about you having access to a kitchen."

Luka was slightly offended, but at least at no point did his father say: "you are forbidden" from the kitchen, which made it a little better.

...

Luka was an intern at an attorney's office. Before he arrived for the first time, he thought naively that he was going to be attending court hearings and learning how to more efficiently and reasonably yell at people, but unfortunately, that didn't seem to be the

case. He took a glance at his massive stack of research papers, then fell back in his chair with such an immense amount of blankness on his face that it could rival the wall's vividness. Oh, and his leg fell asleep. Amazing.

While basking in annoyance, Luka registered with mild displeasure that someone was intensely coughing next to him.

"AHOUGH HOUGH HOUGH UGH COUGH COUGH."

He waited.

"COUGH ACK HOUGH COUGH COUGH."

.....

Luka silently applauded the lung capacity of this thoughtful gentleman who decided to bless his humble ears by expelling air incessantly, excessively, and with great volume. Honestly, it was quite impressive, considering that he had been keeping it up for the last 5 minutes. Luka wondered if he should offer the man a cough drop at this point, it sounded like he needed it.

Shutting his eyes in resignation, Luka reached into his cabinet blindly and grabbed what seemed to be the box of honey-infused cough drops that he'd purchased from Walmart the other day. He gave it to (threw the box in the general direction of) the man, who was still attempting to cough his lungs out.

He listened to the unboxing, unwrapping, and subsequent confused screaming and silently hoped that he would not receive an empty box back.

Hmmmmmm.

Luka opened his eyes, suddenly remembering that he had bought a box of fake blood pills for Halloween.

After a very discordant clean-up session infused with a touch of loud, chaotic vocal noises and broken eardrums, some passive-aggressive words were exchanged.

In any case.

Luka, after he contemplated his life choices, reflected upon his decisions, and mourned his deceased eardrums, came to the conclusion that he should treat the traumatized guy to coffee to show his heartfelt apology. Therefore, Luka, known for possessing the capability to butcher even mashed potatoes so badly that it looked like they contained the entire periodic table of elements, and his dog would look at it with contempt, turned his devious gaze to the supply of coffee beans in his pantry.

The coffee beans looked very unreconciled with their inevitable and imminent sacrifice.

...

After all, Luka had received a very charming note from a sender who remained anonymous after the wicked young man tricked them into trying his new tea recipe with puppy eyes.

“Your tea is awful. Your tea is extremely disgusting. Your tea has grown legs and bolted past the region of ordinary unpalatableness and proceeded to the omnipotent realm of absolute repulsiveness. A single drop would most likely possess the capability of killing a perfectly strong and healthy adult elephant within a 50-mile radius with its unappetizingness and absolute nastiness. Your tea has caused me to suddenly acquire the ability to use figurative language, something even my English teacher failed to do. I have no idea how I survived or how you accomplished this feat, but please do not try it again. I ask for the physical and mental health of your next test subject. Don’t commit murder, Luka, murder is illegal.”

How encouraging, Luka thought with an innocent smile. Maybe he could try arson next time instead, but preferably not in his own kitchen. He’d much rather not decimate it.

Meanwhile, the coughing man, who was typing on his laptop, felt a cold shiver run down his spine. There was a distinct, unsettling feeling of inexplicable precognition floating into his mind, like a stubborn child knocking persistently on a locked door. He tried his best to reassure himself that it was nothing and that he was just suffering from sleep deprivation and needed better coffee. Seriously, the stuff that was offered at the attorney’s office was

horrible and a disgrace to all coffee. It was time for them to upgrade their brand of choice because the unappealing, dark greenish-brown liquid emitted a menacing smell that was vaguely reminiscent of a mic of charred, burning tree branches and vinegar. It was so bad that the fumes were almost tangible. The coffee successfully removes all desire to consume it from any sane human's brain and is absolutely rancid and definitely not made for ingestion. The man had a whole pile of never-ending tasks to complete, and he couldn't live on the overroasted trash as black and tasteless as his boss's soul. Thus, if he wished to drink something other than the aforementioned black and tasteless trash, he must spend his own hard-earned money on better-quality coffee beans, which was not ideal. If only there could be some high-caliber coffee available to drag him out of this hell...

...

The next day, Luka joyously walked into the man's office with a harmless smile on his face. His ocean-blue eyes were sparkling with delight. He looked like what one would expect the human form of a golden retriever to look like, and a furiously wagging tail behind him could almost be visualized. In his slender hands was a meticulously decorated coffee cup, which effectively concealed the unspeakable horror within. The man thought that this was the highest degree of sincerity for an apology, and so he accepted it with gratitude. To him, Luka was like an angel, coming down from heaven to provide him with (much appreciated) sustenance that made up for his dangerously few hours of sleep which wasn't very good sleep either. Under Luka's anticipating gaze, he takes a big sip...

And every single one of his co-workers was bestowed with the harmonious, resonating sounds of his coughing and hacking, except it went on for twice as long as last time, the one that Luka had the privilege to be present for.

From that day onwards, the boss never received a complaint about their coffee again, and the man learned that demons are angels who fell from grace.

Student Name: Sophia Bellard

Grade: 11

School: St Agnes Academy

Title: aMERica

Category: Poetry

Key: Silver Key

Educator:

America, I breathe you in, I sing for you, I digest your star-spangled beauty

Crimson red, for my ancestor's blood – you are independence

Yankee blue for your God-venging valor, you have cried for yourself, you have inspired national tears, and it is with this flag we wipe our cheeks

Between every streak of blood there is a line of white – but white is White and white is Red and white is Black and white is Brown and white is Yellow – white is not just white and it never has been

America, I whisper, do you love me?

I am your white stripes – I am Black, I am White, I am Red Native, I am everything:

I have been here longer than anyone, terraced this land, cultivated maize and your desires, I have settled, and I have stayed – my legends haunt this country, my ancestors are the summit of mountain, the cool breeze that demands reverence

I have sailed across the Atlantic, I have thrashed against royal restraints, broken free, bruised and haggard, from authority – my battle cry for representation rings perpetually in my ears, my ancestors with spreadeagle hands crafted your declaration

I have toiled on this land, I have been beaten-battered-banished, my Black skin has burned hotly beneath the sun, and it has burned even more under scrutiny – my ancestors have swallowed and choked on oppression, they have brawled with society and God – smiles down since they have triumphed

America, I whisper, do you understand me?

So savagely I wish that I reflected all that I am! I want you to see America, this red, this white, this blue – it is everyone, it is all of us!

A match of equality has been struck and tossed over stacked logs of liberty and justice and

Oh! How the fire burns beautifully bright!

America, America, do you hear me? I am yelling – glowing effervescently with every color that I am; every race, every culture, everyone that has come before me:

I have my grandmother's African hair; it coils maniacally around my head, but it is gorgeous, and it is mine and hers to share – centuries' worth of heritage twined along each strand

My eyes are indigenous brown, they are the color of the soft, plowed soil, of the Earth which is ours to defend

I am light skin because I am both skin – my mama is lovely, flushed cheeks, freckled pastel – my father is almond brown, corded gentle hands and forearms, he is a Black man

Thick threads of crimson, navy, and white stitch us all, righteously together – there are stars in our eyes and stripes of freedom along our backs

America, I whisper, we are all you

Student Name: Avani Yaltho

Grade: 10

School: St Agnes Academy

Title: American Girls

Category: Poetry

Key: Silver Key

Educator:

"American Girls" Copy Change "America the Beautiful" by Katherine Lee Bates

O beautiful for clear blue eyes

For waves of golden locks

For light skinned long legged majesties

Above me there they talk

America! America!

God shed no grace on me

He crowned thy pretty pale haired head

That I hunger to be!

No beauty in my darker skin

Ancestors drenched in sun

A redeeming chance for their kin

Across the sea they run!

America! America!

Where foreign is a flaw

In this land where dreamers long

But don't belong at all

Student Name: Jessica Wang  
Grade: 9  
School: St Agnes Academy  
Title: An Afternoon With Ye Ye  
Category: Personal Essay & Memoir  
Key: Silver Key  
Educator: Herman Sutter

“Are you ready?” Grandpa called with his arms crossed, leaning against the wooden door frame. I dashed out of my bedroom with messy hair and exclaimed, “Yes, Ye Ye!”

Ye Ye means grandpa in Mandarin. My grandpa is an adventurer at heart. At 80 years old, he is rarely at home, except for meals and bedtime. He spends his days roaming the city, sauntering through parks, exploring apple orchards, and capturing every moment with a blurry selfie. His skin is weathered, thin, and permanently sun-tanned, serving as a testament to his obstinate refusal towards sunscreen. Ye Ye always has a serious expression, but once you get to know him, you will find him to be the most cheerful person ever.

Gripping the railings, we cautiously descended what seemed like an endless flight of stairs to reach ground level. Ye Ye inhabited the fourth floor of a tired, gray apartment building in a small community in Shenyang, China. Climbing stairs was part of his daily routine, but for me, a carefree eight-year-old girl who only visited during the summer, it was much more of a challenge. Clinging firmly to his hand, I let Ye Ye lead me out of the gilded yet worn-out neighborhood gates and towards the bus stop.

Under the cool shades of the stop, I squinted my eyes against the harsh afternoon sun, attempting to decipher the Mandarin advertisements on the glossy plastic walls. Naturally, I struggled, as I was only familiar with the simplest characters I learned from my Saturday Chinese school. I felt the inquisitive glances from adults passing by, confused as to why I wasn't in school. Summer break in China was still a few weeks away, so local students were restlessly preparing for final exams.

Ye Ye and I settled on the cold metal bench, and he reminded me to look out for bus 135. As we waited, I silently observed the unique pedestrians that walked past me—from children licking melted popsicles to old women in flamboyant hats. Even in the afternoon of a serene little town, the world seemed to be in such a rush. Everyone moved with purpose, desperate to reach their destinations as quickly as possible. But to me, it was merely a lazy summer afternoon, and I couldn't help but feel like a naive girl amidst all this frenetic energy.

Finally, I looked up to see bus 135 rolling towards us, its green body paint glimmering under the sunlight.

“It’s here!” I called to YeYe, whose eyes struggled to stay open. Rising to my feet, I grabbed his hand and pulled with all my strength to help him up from the seat, so vigorously that I fell over. We both laughed as I jumped back up, eager to board the bus. The door groaned open, as though it was weary from its job. YeYe tapped his senior card on the scanner to pay the driver, and I followed him closely, holding my head high. Children under 130 centimeters were permitted a free ride, and though YeYe always wanted me to grow taller, I was proud to be under the limit. There was only one open seat on the bus, and YeYe instructed me to sit down since I couldn’t reach the handrails. The woman next to me quickly stood and offered her seat to YeYe. He thanked her and sat, grateful to finally rest his tired legs. I leaned my head against the window and closed my eyes, relaxing under the fiery sun.

Around thirty minutes later, I felt YeYe’s warm hand rest on my shoulder, waking me from my peaceful nap.

“We’re here,” he whispered as he grabbed my hand, leading me off the bus.

I walked aside YeYe, listening as he whistled a joyful tune. Soon, we arrived in front of a tall, majestic building with gleaming windows and ivory walls.

“Wow,” I murmured. YeYe always had a knack for discovering exciting places to visit.

“Can you read what this says?” He pointed to a sign next to the building. I glanced at the English translation underneath the Mandarin, narrowing my eyes and pretending to struggle with the Mandarin characters.

“A science museum?” I asked YeYe.

“Yes! You learned these words in Chinese school?” YeYe’s lips curved into a huge grin as he patted my shoulder, visibly impressed. I held back laughter as I stuck my tongue out at my grandpa, glad to have fooled him so easily.

YeYe pulled the entrance door open for me, and I darted inside the museum. I ignored him when he called my name from a distance, assured that he would find me eventually. I ran towards the first exhibit I saw, an interactive display of a cartoon girl’s face. The girl’s mouth was wide open, her dark hair was tied in pigtails like mine, and her eyes sparkled like she was hiding a surprise. A group of parents stood by her mouth, chatting. After briefly eavesdropping on their conversations, I discovered that we could enter the girl’s mouth for a tour of the body parts.

Interested, I skillfully maneuvered past the parents in front of me, ducking to enter her open mouth. The ground was soft and cushiony, and it reminded me of the tumbling mats used in my dance classes. Everything was covered in a layer of pink, made to resemble the rosy interior of a mouth. On all fours crawling into the darkness, I inadvertently

bumped my head on a rubbery ball hanging from the roof. All of a sudden, a playful voice filled the space, explaining that the hanging ball was the uvula, a tiny, special organ in charge of keeping the mouth moistened.

Curiously, I opened my own mouth wide and curled my tongue, trying to reach the uvula at the back of my throat. After several unsuccessful attempts, I abandoned the quirky effort and continued crawling through the exhibit. In the darkness, I stumbled upon a narrow slide symbolizing the esophagus and, without hesitation, slid down with my arms extended, shouting, "Wee!"

Emerging in a large pit, I looked up to see parents peering down from above. I scanned their faces, searching for YeYe. It didn't take long to spot him; he was readily pointing his pink iPad in my direction, capturing my joy through a series of photos. I beamed and struck a pose, forming a peace sign with two fingers. Waving my arms, I motioned for YeYe to come join me inside the pit, which contained an array of body system exhibits.

I clung tight to YeYe's hand, my fingers tingling with anticipation as we navigated through the pit. YeYe was captivated by the vibrant, shiny fact cards and the subtle hum of educational videos, but these exhibits didn't interest me at all. In the corner, I spotted a crowd of parents and children, and I rushed over, dragging YeYe behind me.

Jumping up and down, I strained to make sense of the commotion from the back of the crowd, but with no luck. Even YeYe, a tall man of 180 cm, had to rise to his toes before explaining that it was another interactive exhibit. The crowd started to disperse as visitors lost interest, and I pushed forward to finally get a glimpse of what was happening.

A little boy about my age frustratedly pulled on a pink rope that extended out from a human silhouette. I leaned forward, attempting to read the exhibit label. YeYe, certain that I wouldn't understand, quickly explained that the rope represented the length of the small intestine. The boy rolled his eyes as the lengthy rope refused to reach an end, and finally, in an exasperated motion, let go of the rope and muttered, "How pointless."

Excited that it was now my turn, I scampered over to the silhouette and wiped my sweaty hands on my skirt. Firmly grasping it, I channeled my inner superhero and pulled with a powerful force, determined to conquer this challenge.

A minute later, my muscles began to ache, and I came to understand why the boy gave up on what seemed like an easy task. The rope became harder to pull as it got longer as if the noisy museum frightened it. Abruptly, the pink rope resisted my pull, causing me to stagger forward slightly. Undaunted, I intensified my efforts, but it remained stubbornly immobile.

"You did it," YeYe assured me, patting me on the back. "That's about 7 meters, the length of your small intestine. Can you imagine this entire rope fitting inside your body?" I thought about my small stature, which barely surpassed one meter, and shook my head in disbelief. However, I was quickly filled with pride realizing that I completed the

challenge. A satisfied smirk formed on my lips as I watched the rope slither gracefully back into its hiding place.

Climbing the stairs to exit the pit, I looked around, admiring the colorful museum, which filled with more visitors as the afternoon drifted by. YeYe glanced at his watch and, realizing it was nearly 5 PM, suggested that we head home after one more exhibit.

“What do you want to see?” I asked YeYe with bright, sparkling eyes, trusting him as my tour guide. He chuckled, motioning for me to follow him.

Surprisingly, unlike the body parts exhibit, nobody was in line when YeYe and I arrived at a large plasma orb positioned on a raised platform. The allure of the orb fascinated me, and I immediately rushed over, prickling with enthusiasm. Staring at the orb, I slowly lifted my hands, uttering nonsense as if I were a magician casting spells. Electric energy rushed to my fingertips the second they landed on the glass ball. The purple plasma was like a long ribbon, dancing under my fingertips. I felt like a master puppeteer as the ribbon obediently followed every movement of my hands, gracefully twirling in response to my subtle commands. Listening to the soft hum of the orb, a serene melody intertwined with the fierce cracking of energy, I found myself entranced by its subtle yet harmonic symphony. The soothing hum of the plasma orb was interrupted by a series of noisy clicks, and I looked up to see, once again, a large pink iPad pointed at me. I contorted my face, imitating the expression of witches I saw in cartoons, and stared into the orb, posing like I was reading an oracle.

As I sat on the bus ride home, my stomach hummed a quiet tune, echoing the lingering sensations of the museum and subtly reminding me that it was time for dinner. Leaning my head on the cool glass window, I closed my eyes, savoring the memories collected from this delightful afternoon with my grandpa. The museum, I realized, wasn't enjoyable solely for its exhibits; it was YeYe's loveable presence that made the day so special. I glanced at YeYe, who was resting in the seat next to me and hugged him tightly. YeYe turned his head, startled, but gradually relaxed into the embrace.

The bus rolled to a stop near YeYe's neighborhood, and we strolled towards home, admiring the vibrant bursts of scarlet in what used to be a warm blanket of blue sky. The clouds were adorned with a glowing outline as if a skilled artist had meticulously painted each one with a golden edge.

Passing through the worn gates, I took a deep breath, preparing to take on the physical challenge of climbing the apartment's stairs. Halfway up, I had to pause to catch my breath, and YeYe teased that I was in worse shape than my grandma.

As YeYe foraged for his house key, I admired the two cardstock men who bedecked the door, symbolizing protection from evil. Spinning around, I noticed the same pair of guardians decorating the neighborhood's door, the only difference being the color of their clothing. They faced each other, smiling, and stroked their long, dark beards. I thought

about my own house in the States, where door guardians were never put up. The only traditional Chinese decoration was a red lucky knot on our balcony, but it seemed like nothing compared to the abundance of ornaments in Ye Ye's home. I traced the golden outline of the cutout with my finger, mesmerized by the smooth feel of the paper. Though I had just met these colorful paper men, their presence somehow provided a sense of comfort for me.

The keys clicked as they turned in the lock, and Ye Ye pushed vigorously to open the stubborn old door. We were greeted by the rhythmic tapping of a rolling pin against a bamboo cutting board, the familiar percussion of Nai Nai, my grandma, making dumplings. Ye Ye and I rushed to the kitchen, and he immediately put on his apron, ready to help prepare dinner. I stood next to Nai Nai's cutting board, watching silently as she kneaded dough.

"Tong Tong, go wash your hands," Nai Nai said, smiling. "Let me teach you how to fold dumplings." I let out a squeal, nearly crashing into the doorframe as I sprinted towards the bathroom, eager to participate in making dinner.

Nai Nai held my hands in hers as she began kneading with the rolling pin. Her hands were wrinkled yet soft, and her palms felt warm against my fingers. The dough spread out beneath the rolling pin, transforming from a shapeless mass into a smooth canvas. Nai Nai's skilled hands, leading mine, guided the dough as it tumbled on the cutting board, and I watched, fascinated by her magic.

"Here," Nai Nai suddenly released her hold. "You try."

Confidently, I clutched the rolling pin and began to press the dough with all my strength. To my dismay, without her assistance, the uncooperative clump refused to spread out the same way as earlier. Rising to tippy toes, I tried again, as if this gained height would make me stronger.

"That's good enough," Nai Nai chuckled. She stretched the dough into a long rope and chopped it into pieces. I watched in awe as she grabbed one piece and gently pressed it into a perfect, thin circle to form a dumpling wrap. She topped it with a scoop of pork filling, grabbed the sides of the dumpling, and effortlessly pinched the edges to seal it off.

Enthusiastically, I grabbed a piece of dough, attempting to imitate Nai Nai. I flattened it with my palm, making a thick, oval dumpling wrap and placing a giant scoop of filling on top. As I pinched the edges like Nai Nai, the stuffing seeped out, its moisture making it impossible to seal the dumpling. Shaking her head while smiling, Nai Nai took the "dumpling" from me and flattened it with her palm, transforming it into a meat pie right before my eyes. I grinned, glad that my awkward dumpling could now live its full potential as a beautiful meat pie.

As Nai Nai expertly placed another flawless dumpling on the cutting board, I couldn't help but notice that the board was gradually succumbing to the invasion of my meat pies. My

overfilled dumplings, one by one, were flattened by Nai Nai, turning them into allies of evil. I took a deep breath and grabbed another dough piece, determined to master the art of dumpling-making and stop these horrible pies. I flattened it carefully, mindful not to make it too thick or thin. In fear of adding too much stuffing again, I asked Nai Nai to scoop it onto my dumpling wrap, knowing that her magical hands would manage to get the perfect amount. As she made her own dumpling, I followed along with unwavering attention and finally managed to seal it off successfully— a small victory in my battle against the invading meat pies.

“Nai Nai, look!” I held up my first successful dumpling like a first-place trophy. Nai Nai squealed and clapped her hands with excitement.

“Tong Tong, you’re so talented! Already better than your YeYe.”

YeYe, who had been preparing the steamer pot in the corner, jokingly shot Nai Nai an annoyed glare but quickly rushed over to admire my dumpling. He proudly nodded his head in approval, gestured a thumbs up, and returned to his job by the pot.

Nai Nai and I continued to wrap dumplings, organizing them into a perfect array. The ones I made were asymmetrical, but I was too proud to notice. When enough were folded, I walked over to YeYe to watch him steam them. Over his shoulder, the heat sweltered my face, forcing me to stumble back. YeYe, on the other hand, seemed completely unbothered. He gently pushed me to the side, warning me to stay away from the stove. I left the kitchen to sit down on the sofa, knowing that YeYe and Nai Nai would serve me warm dumplings in just a couple more minutes.

The second I heard Nai Nai’s high-pitched voice bouncing off the apartment walls calling for me, I jumped from the sofa and dashed into the kitchen. Grabbing a few pairs of chopsticks and tossing them on the table, I sat down on my seat and intertwined my fingers, feigning patience. YeYe placed the dumplings and meat pies down and I immediately grabbed the biggest dumpling on the plate. The first bite of food crafted with my own hands carried a flavor that surpassed any culinary masterpiece. Whether biased or not, the feeling of contributing to the meal added an extra layer to its exquisiteness.

As we shared laughter over the freshly made dumplings, the museum’s allure momentarily faded. In the embrace of family traditions and the simple pleasures of a shared meal, I found a sense of solace, making this day a chapter to be cherished in my memories forever.

Student Name: Frida Buck  
Grade: 10  
School: St Agnes Academy  
Title: Coffee Countertops  
Category: Dramatic Script  
Key: Silver Key  
Educator: Herman Sutter

INT. Coffee shop Counter- Morning

ELANOR (40s) hurries behind the coffee shop counter while ODETTE stands in front of the counter awkwardly and takes out a book from her bag. ODETTE reads in front of the counter while ELANOR works behind it. The coffee shop is warm and homely looking.

Elanor scrubs the counters and wipes the old daily special off of the black chalkboard above the counter with a rag. She takes a piece of chalk that rests on the counter and writes 'iced mochas are now available.'

ELANOR

Odette you can sit over by the window while I open up. When it gets too busy go ahead and sit in the back so a customer can have your seat.

Odette turns to exit the scene but she hesitates and turns back to face the counter.

ODETTE

Why do I have to spend my first day of summer here?

ELANOR

You always spend summer with me here.

ODETTE

That doesn't mean I want to.

Elanor sighs.

ELANOR

Mr. Morris should come in here around three o'clock. Then you can bother him instead of me.

Odette leaves the counter in defeat.

INT. COFFEE SHOP WINDOW - Day

Odette reads comfortably by the window. She is sitting in a cushioned chair and has a bottle of water in front of her. Odette suddenly closes her book and looks up. Her eyes scan the room around her and they squint as she seems to focus harder on her surroundings. Her eyes dart around quickly until they fall upon a woman yelling on the phone. The stressed woman has her phone pressed to her ear and her other hand massaging her forehead.

STRESSED WOMAN

Put me on the phone with the doctor! What do you mean she hasn't eaten? What kind of an establishment is this? My mother is dying and you just forget to feed her? No, this is ridiculous. Hello? Hello?

the stressed woman slams her phone on the table in front of her and pressed her eyes shut in frustration. Odette watches her do all of this. Odette quickly flips through her book and tears a page out. Odette takes a pencil and rapidly begins to sketch the stressed woman on top of the words of the book page. She quickly finishes, revealing a messy depiction of the woman with an irritated expression. Odette holds the drawing up and closes her right eye to compare the drawing with the woman in front of her. She tucks the drawing away in her book and turns around in her chair to find another muse. When Odette starts to tear another page out of her book, Elanor abruptly walks up beside her.

ELANOR

You need to sit in the back or at least behind the counter. The shop is filling up.

Odette nods and takes her things as she stands up.

ELANOR

Oh, and please stop staring at people. It's rude and a bit creepy.

ODETTE

sorry.

Odette and Elanor leave the empty table and exit the seating area.

I

NT. Coffee shop Counter- AFTERNOON

Odette sits perched on a stool behind the counter motionless, her chin on her arms, as the line of customers move in front of her. She picks up many ripped book pages with illustrations on them and looks through her collection. The first is the drawing of the stressed woman from earlier, the second is of a little boy laughing, the third is of a focused student wearing headphones, and the last one was blank. ODETTE puts the first three drawings into a pile on the counter and focuses on the torn page from the book. She furrows her brows as she scans the busy room. ODETTE looks back down at her book page and places her pencil back down on the counter.

ELANOR

Good afternoon Mr. Morris!

Odette's head immediately shoots up and looks over at Mr. Morris who nods his head and sits in a plush chair by the door.

INT. COFFEE SHOP LOUNGE AREA- Afternoon

Mr. Morris is an old man probably in his late 70s with white hair and a brown beanie on his head. He takes out his newspaper, crosses his legs and reads the paper. Odette takes her drawings and hurries out from behind the counter. She goes to sit next to Mr. Morris who does not address her and continues reading.

ODETTE

I'm so happy to see you. I feel like it's been forever since we last talked.

Mr. Morris glances up from his paper and smiles at Odette before reading again.

ODETTE

I made some new drawings. I like this one the most.

Odette holds up the drawing of the stressed woman. Mr. Morris does not look up from his paper. He ignores her and continues to read.

ODETTE

I think I captured her emotions pretty well. I mean it's obviously not that great I did it in a few minutes. She just seemed so stuck, which I guess I can relate to. Like, not stuck physically or anything, but stuck emotionally I guess. It's like that feeling you have when you think you should do something but you're not sure what. That sounds kind of funny, but that's just how I assumed she felt. Do you ever feel that way?

Mr. Morris does not address Odette, he continues reading without even looking at her.

ODETTE

I'll go get us some coffee.

Mr. Morris opens the newspaper up wide covering his entire face, he folds it down again revealing him wearing a different shirt and a different colored beanie. It is a new day. Odette is now wearing a loose black tank top and blue jeans and has a sketchbook with her this time. She walks up to Mr. Morris and sits in the seat next to him.

ODETTE

I brought a sketchbook this time. My mom lectured me for ruining my novel.

Odette opens her sketchbook and starts to draw.

ODETTE

She seems to yell at me for a lot of things. She says I'm wasting my time with this drawing stuff. She thinks I want to become an artist or something. Which I don't, by the

way. I just... I don't know I like watching other people. God, that makes me sound like a total creep. I just like observing them, trying to figure out how they feel or what they're thinking is fun for me. It's easier than talking to them.

Odette stops drawing and taps Mr. Morris on the shoulder.

ODETTE

Do you want any coffee or something?

Slightly startled, Mr. Morris just smiles and pats Odette's head. He keeps reading his newspaper and Odette exits. Mr. Morris pulls his beanie over his ears. He licks his finger and turns the next page in his paper. Odette runs back to Mr. Morris with two mugs and places one in front of him. Mr. Morris glances at the mug and takes it in his hand.

ODETTE

Thank you for listening to me, by the way. I don't really like talking to people that much if I'm being honest. I guess I've just known you for so long that I've gotten comfortable, you know?

Mr. Morris disregards Odette and rolls up his paper. He downs the rest of his coffee and tucks his paper in his pocket. He nods towards Odette and leaves. Odette sits for a moment staring at his mug before picking it up and cleaning off the table. Odette takes the two mugs in one hand and her sketchbook in the other and leaves the lounge area.

EXT. COFFEE SHOP PATIO - Morning

Odette sits on a patio chair in front of the COFFEE SHOP. There is a patch of grass surrounding the patio and small flowers and weeds blooming from the ground. She is wearing a sundress and flip flops. Odette flips through the pages of her sketchbook and stops every few pages to scribble notes.

Elanor enters and wipes down the table Odette sits at.

ELANOR

Did you work on any of your science? You got low scores last year.

ODETTE

No.

Odette ignores her mom and keeps flipping through her sketchbook.

ELANOR

Fine if that's how you'll go about your work then you'll have to face the consequences.

Elanor snatches the sketchbook from Odette's hands. Odette immediately jumps up from her seat and attempts to take her sketchbook back. Elanor holds the sketchbook away from Odette.

ELANOR

You have to stop wasting your time making silly cartoons.

Odette is flustered and emotional. She is now more passionate and intense as she speaks.

ODETTE

They're not cartoons mom, they're people. They're real life people, those pages are filled with emotion and expression not silly scribbles.

ELANOR

They look like scribbles and wasted time to me. Time that could be spent studying or at least maybe making some real friends.

ODETTE

I have real friends.

ELANOR

Like who? Mr. Morris?

There is an awkward moment of silence. Odette looks down at her feet, embarrassed.

ELANOR

Get yourself together, Odette.

Elanor goes back inside, leaving Odette alone on the patio. Odette dejectedly slumps back into her chair. She puts her head in her hands when Mr. Morris sits at the table and chair beside her area. Mr. Morris opens up his newspaper and reads it without acknowledging Odette at all. Odette gets up from her chair and sits at Mr. Morris's table. Mr. Morris keeps reading his paper.

ODETTE

Can I talk to you?

Odette shyly looks up at Mr. Morris who glances up at her and smiles before returning to his paper.

ODETTE

I feel like I'm doing something wrong. I'm not sure what, I definitely know it's not my lack of studying. I don't think reading textbooks will make me have more friends or maybe be more... determined? I don't know. I don't even know what I'm supposed to be. I spend so much time watching other people to see the way they live. I do it every summer. Maybe I'm too focused on other peoples lives. Maybe I'm forgetting to live mine. I don't know. I don't know anything any more.

Odette sulks and frowns. Mr. Morris is still reading his paper unbothered. Odette turns and looks at Mr. Morris for a moment and then turns back to look at her hands.

ODETTE

I do know one thing. I know that I can't talk to most people, not even my mom, about what I think or how I feel. Maybe it's because they never really listen the way you do, maybe it's cause I know they don't really understand. I'm not sure why it's so different when I talk to you. I just spill my guts out when we talk. So, um, thank you. Thank you Mr. Morris for putting up with me, and making me feel better.

Mr. Morris now glances up at Odette and lowers his newspaper slightly.

ODETTE

Thank you so much.

Mr. Morris hold up his hand as if to stop Odette from saying anymore. He puts his paper on the table and fishes through his pockets. He pulls out his hearing aids and struggles to put them in his ears. Odette sits and watches him with her mouth slightly agape. Mr. Morris looks back up at Odette and smiles.

MR. MORRIS

I'm sorry, miss? Were you saying something?

Odette blinks a few times and closes and opens her mouth. She wants to speak but she remains speechless.

MR. MORRIS

Im sorry, I never wear my hearing aids when I read the paper. It makes it easier to focus.

Odette looks heartbroken, her eyebrows are creased and her eyes look sad. She gulps before speaking again.

ODETTE

That's fine. Um, you can, uh, keep reading.

Mr. Morris takes out his hearing aids and puts them back in his pocket. He smiles at Odette, pats her head, and unfolds his paper again. Odette is sitting to his left sulking and looking completely shocked while Mr. Morris smiles and continues reading.

the end

Student Name: Isabella Bradbury

Grade: 10

School: St Agnes Academy

Title: Death

Category: Poetry

Key: Silver Key

Educator:

Most people don't know what death looks like.

I do.

Death looks like a room in your house left empty

Untouched and door shut

Because no one has the heart to go in it.

It looks like a bed made perfectly- whose sheets will never be ruffled up again.

Like when you look at the house from outside the lights are not on-

And never will be on again.

Death looks like a closet full of clothes that will never be worn again

But that you could never pack into boxes or give away.

It looks like the white fabric draped over the furniture

To keep it from collecting dust.

And most people don't know what death sounds like.

But I do.

Death sounds like the lack of footsteps down the hallway.

It sounds like the absence of a voice coming from the kitchen, yelling at me to get out of bed.

Like the lack of water running

From a morning shower not being taken.

Death sounds like the lack of the knock on my door that usually comes right at the moment my alarm goes off.

Death tastes like the absence of that secret ingredient they always added to a recipe-  
The one you've tried to make over and over but it never quite tastes the same.

Death feels like the scratchiness of a paper hospital gown

And just as thin

And just as empty.

It feels like a void, an emptiness that can never be filled

And a regret and a longing so lonely.

Death smells like their favorite perfume lingering all over the house, so much you can almost sense their presence,

And it feels like they're everywhere and nowhere at the same time.

And most people don't know what grief feels like.

But I do.

Student Name: Kendall Doerr

Grade: 12

School: St Agnes Academy

Title: how many pigeons would it take to lift a circus over Broadway?

Category: Poetry

Key: Silver Key

Educator:

How many pigeons would it take to lift a circus over Broadway?

How many ways are there to say "I love you?"

Do hermit crabs have shell preferences?

Did Cinderella purposely lose her slipper?

Or was she smarter than we give her credit for?

these are questions I might never know the answer to

mysteries that may never be solved

locks that do not have keys

hidden treasures without maps

but the world will still turn on its axes

plants will still oxidize

geese will still migrate

people will still be anesthetized

and gravity will overpower us all

And i'm beginning to think that it is okay

It is okay to not know

Because it is in the not knowing

That we come to know what it is to be human

That we familiarize ourselves with limitations  
from the dust of the earth to the ashes carried by the wind  
the confetti on the floor and the sawdust mingled with broken glass and spilt beer  
and the trampled pencil shavings and crushed goldfish  
the dust bunnies in the corner and the crumpled rose buried within a dictionary  
we are all one and the same  
we are all crumbs, shells, the left behind pieces of those who have walked before us  
broken vases glued together so many times they have become unrecognizable  
incapable of putting ourselves right round again  
all trying to flee from our imperfections when in fact  
our futile escapes merely crack us more

When will we stop running?  
When will we surrender?  
these are questions i might never know the answers to  
But i know the true detective  
The one with the keyring  
The mapmaker  
and so I am okay with not knowing  
because I know what it means to be human  
and i simply cannot be anything else

Student Name: Natalia Silva

Grade: 12

School: St Agnes Academy

Title: Lavender Crush

Category: Poetry

Key: Silver Key

Educator:

Sitting crisscrossed in the grass under the soft amber sun

Picking at the lavender flowers

Braiding each other's hair

The butterflies and giddiness,

I thought it was normal.

Never peculiar.

I didn't give it a second thought when my friend's older  
sister asked about my day,

and the hair stood on the back of my neck

Maybe it was natural to be nervous when a cool girl  
complimented me

Or peculiar?

Does everyone feel the way I did about the princesses in the movies?

We all wanted to be them...

But I don't think we all dreamed of marrying the sugar plum fairy

Peculiar.

Snowball fights. Playing tag. Pretending to be husband and wife when we played house.

My love for the color pink.

My hatred of the color pink.

Princess Leia.

American Girl Dolls.

Rainbow loom.

Peculiar.

Feeling torn between tomboy and girly girl

Wanting my friend at ballet class to joke around only with

me

Blushing away from pop music videos

Speeding past the models in store windows

Peculiar.

A girlhood full of innuendos.

I wish I had seen them earlier

But I also wish I never knew.

Student Name: Cindy Lu  
Grade: 10  
School: St Agnes Academy  
Title: Life Dances in Circles  
Category: Poetry  
Key: Silver Key  
Educator:

In shafts of miscellaneous hues,  
I'm the main character in a world of timeless slow waltz.  
I sit in front of an ornamented cylinder,  
Until the crescent of brilliant gold blended through blues.  
Seven am I, so smile I do.

Traces of childhood filtered black and white,  
Teenaged tangled tango caught within the endless abyss.  
I sit behind a fine disk,  
Listen do I,  
Until dusk pirouettes to the grand jete of dawn,  
The sweetest sixteen someone saw or will see.

No longer caressed with pink,  
Only sunlight tap dances in perpetuity.  
I yearn to blossom on expeditions worlds away,  
Until I uncover,  
The cliché "purpose" that awaits so sincerely.  
The real adult at only eighteen.

Illuminated in delicate purity to compromise,

Blushed in the butterfly minuet of my first dance.  
I toast champagne in such delicate disguise,  
Follow do the melodic harmony,  
Of clinks,  
Drowning a symphony.  
Merely at the turning point of twenty-five.

Either a midnight blue or sunset pink,  
To be determined by the moonwalk of shooting stars.  
I rock back and forth passionately in second nature,  
Until a lullaby finally inundated a dreamy world of sunset.  
I'm 30 now.

In the hazy growth of green,  
She's the sun in my mini solar system who skips, jumps, and jives.  
I sit beside her and an ornamented cylinder,  
Until she blew away the top of number seven.  
I'm 37 now.

My adulthood is spiraled into rainbows,  
Yet she grooves in two-step as time has treated her well.  
I sit reminiscing my naive chapters,  
Until I conclude she is almost another me,  
I'm 46 now.

No more sheltering her in iridescent bubbles,  
I am left to slow dance amongst the forthcoming.  
She will embark on expeditions worlds away,

Until she returns back home.

I'm 48 now.

Budened black only refines creases indicating my age,

Marigolds stroll to oblivion without me.

She now cherishes her sunset pink,

Like I had three decades ago.

I'm 60 now.

I meandered majestic labyrinths myself,

To discover a truth:

Life dances in circles.

If only I were 7 now.

Student Name: Anaiya Nasir

Grade: 10

School: St Agnes Academy

Title: Recipe for Revolution

Category: Poetry

Key: Silver Key

Educator:

First, sauté the free general population of the English colonies on very high heat.

Then, add it into a hot pot to boil.

Let it simmer for 17 minutes and 54 seconds before you add other ingredients.

Then, take sour French and Indian war oil and pour it into the pot.

Stir and mix to create a bitter taste.

Then, sprinkle spicy British debt chilies into the pot to add flavor.

Now, let it sit for a couple of minutes to let the flavor seep deep inside.

Once it's all fully absorbed, put 2 cups of a thick paste of taxes and tariffs

Then, take out your arrangement of European enlightenment spices.

Add a hint of popular sovereignty, natural rights, and consent of the governed into your stew.

Shake to spark a revolutionary taste.

To make sure the spicy flavor soaks uniformly, let it sit for 17 minutes and 75 seconds.

Then, add some nationalism stock into your developing stew.

Enough, to make it fluid and free flowing but not too much to lose the flavor.

Lastly, to prepare your main ingredient, chop your autonomy beef, season it with the need of representation, and marinate it in tangy dressing of religion.

Now, add it into the stew and mix.

Cover the pot with a heavy lid of God.

Let it simmer for another 17 minutes and 83 seconds.

After time has passed your revolutionary beef stew should be ready.

Enjoy!

Student Name: Isabella Bradbury

Grade: 10

School: St Agnes Academy

Title: Thin Ice

Category: Poetry

Key: Silver Key

Educator:

I had always wanted to be a figure skater

Or a ballerina

Before I quite realized what that meant.

I fell in love with watching the dancers

Whimsical,

Lithe,

And movements like water

But it wasn't enough to watch them

I wanted to- had to-

be them

And I have always been naturally skinny

But it seemed skinny

Wasn't skinny enough

And thin wasn't

Thin enough

And it seemed my baby fat wasn't baby fat

But just fat fat

And it seemed that I would never be a figure skater.

But somehow

I convinced myself that I could do it as soon as I lost weight-

That once I lost a few pounds I'd be happy.

And somehow I convinced myself that this was only temporary.

That this was not permanent.

Have you ever wanted- needed- something so badly

You would lose yourself

Just to have it?

This question is about self-love

And self-denial

But the answer

Is not permanent:

"Put that down,"

My coach said,

After catching me snacking at practice

"Carbs like that go straight to the thighs"

And

Stop eating that junk

Said my mother

Smacking the muffin out of my hands

If you just drink some water or chew some ice

You won't feel hungry anymore

So I sipped and I crunched  
On water  
and ice  
and nothing  
Until my mouth was cold and numb  
But somehow,  
After all of that,  
Still empty.

The inside of my cheeks were cool to the touch  
My tongue was the type of cold that burned  
Frozen solid

My mouth became the ice rink.

A small girl spinned gracefully on blades  
At the back of my throat  
And I thought that if I could just  
Reach for her  
I could finally have her grace...

And my mouth became a music box;  
A thin ballerina pirouetted  
At the back of my throat on pointe  
And if only I could reach for her, stick my fingers far enough back,  
I could still have her poise.

My mouth was a music box

And the music was the sound of the toilet bowl flushing.  
The verse was the sound of the bathtub filling in the background  
So they couldn't hear me throwing up.  
The chorus was the angry thunder in my stomach.  
The choir was the crack in my voice as I sobbed.  
And the song was the sigh of the creaking scale.

But I was the conductor.  
I played all the instruments.  
I was the composer.  
I was the one who winded up the music box and sent the ballerina spinning.  
And this  
Is the only thing  
That is permanent.

Student Name: Adanna Okeke

Grade: 11

School: St Agnes Academy

Title: Who Holds the Pen?

Category: Poetry

Key: Silver Key

Educator:

Before I was born, I was an idea in your mind.

Before I was born, I was a future outlined

By societal expectations and cultural norms

And outdated ideas to which I won't conform.

Before I was born, I was a light in the dark.

I was a new beginning for you, a new page in your arc.

Before I was born, I was always your dream.

What would I do; what could I be?

But before I was born, I wasn't me.

I was made of your hopes and of his dreams.

Before I was born, I couldn't speak.

I couldn't talk; I couldn't think

So you became authors and wrote my story with ink.

But now that I'm living, now that I'm grown,

I can think for myself and won't claim your tale as my own.

Now that I'm living, now that I'm grown,

I am no longer his and your little clone.

Now that I'm living, your ideas fade to black.

Where once your dream thrived, a nightmare stares back.

Now that I'm living, two worlds collide.  
My reality, your fantasy can't coincide.  
Now that, I'm living, now that I'm older,  
I need to be free, to be louder and bolder.

I need to feel free to say what I think,  
What I know to be right even if you might disagree.  
I need to be free to walk my own path.  
I need you to be brave and take a step back.  
I need you to listen and truly comprehend  
That your time as my story's writers has come to an end.  
That though I invite you to remain in my life  
Your role is to suggest; not to revise.  
For I've picked up a pen and turned a blank page.  
It's the end of your era and the start of my age.

Student Name: Eliza beech  
Grade: 8  
School: St Francis Episcopal Day School  
Title: The lilies  
Category: Poetry  
Key: Silver Key  
Educator: Sharon Willcutts

The waves cascade in the sea of people  
Clad in black  
Silent  
The rain pounds the walls  
The wind beats at the doors  
The world's own kind of tribute  
To the body  
In the box  
No noise comes from the rows of pews  
Silence, a thick fog  
Suffocating my lungs  
Gasping for air  
The words they once offered fell upon deaf ears  
Their muffled apologies  
pitied condolences  
Meaningless  
The most rancid of all of their verbal venom  
"I understand"  
Fury in my stomach bubbles to the surface  
Hot and searing  
Like the tears that lingered on my cheeks

My eyes wander back to the box  
The old polished lumber  
Soon to be 6 feet under  
Covered with blooming life  
Chrysanthemums and Marigolds  
Hundreds of blossoms  
Soon to be wilted  
All for the fleeting beauty of the moment  
The white lilies stand out among the pile  
White and pale  
But they were her favorite  
Whispers  
Worried voices  
"Too young"  
"Too soon"  
I can't listen  
Much more of this i'll break  
Spilling out my feeling over the edges of my soul  
Cracks in the glass  
That once stood strong  
The lilies on the casket call me to them  
Again  
Again  
The memories of her garden  
Her vases  
Her smile  
Her  
The sea of people file out

Their minds already on other things

Soon to forget of her

I don't reach the door

I go to the lilies that cover her

And say one last sweet

Goodbye

Student Name: Luke Burke  
Grade: 12  
School: St Thomas High School  
Title: End Over End  
Category: Short Story  
Key: Silver Key  
Educator: Daniel Green

"Pull the crab net up boys! Ring 'em in!" I shouted from from the pilot house of my crabbing vessel. This vessel was an older girl, but she had everything where it counted. My father built it with his old crew back in '34. The decks were wood, the stacks atop the pilot house were from old steamships, and the diesels were still original. I kept this boat up well. My family, however, disowned me after I fostered a nasty drinking habit at sea. My sweet wife, sadly, also hates me and my kind.

"Great work Declan!" I shouted down to him as he rang in many large crabs spilling onto the deck.

"Gotcha Cap," Declan shouted back, gesturing a thumbs up.

I went below deck to my quarters and carefully picked up a letter resting on the shelf near the couch in the rear of my quarters. I examined the letter and brushed the dust off. It read State of Massachusetts Official. I opened the letter and found that it was a divorce decree for me. I began to sulk on the couch and stare at it.

"Hey Cap," Trent said as he stepped into my quarters. "Hope I ain't intruding or nothin'."

"Nah. Nah, come on in."

He stood near me and said that the clouds were beginning to look nasty. I felt the wind push against the port side of the pilot house, almost taking the ship with it. I got to my feet and looked at the nasty clouds brewing in front of the boat.

"We gotta push through this, Trent."

"I'll start battenin' down the hatches and tell everybody," he replied.

I grabbed the letter that was resting on the couch and placed it on the dash atop the instruments on the dash cluster. I grabbed the wheel and began to accelerate the ship head-on into the storm.

The crew was going below deck and beginning to batten down the hatches. The boat was beginning to rock violently with each repeating wave. Trent then came up the ladder to the pilot's house and began to help me pilot the ship. I began to rub a piece of metal in my hand and placed it back in my pocket. I then looked up past the already large waves and caught a glimpse of a rogue. The rogue wave was steadily growing and the waves that I

looked over began to pass. I soon found that my crew and I were in the peaceful gap of receding water feeding that monster of a wave.

"All ahead, full, Trent! We gotta beat that wave before it breaks or we're done."

"Yah," Trent said, as he jammed the ship's throttle to the maximum speed.

The boat was not advancing and the smoke stack was not puffing. Just then, one of our sailors, Ramone, busted into the cabin shouting, "No bueno, Capitan! Water in engine room! Es inundada!"

I stared at him momentarily and yelled, "Well, start bailin' that water out and get us movin', yeah! We're done if we're not quick!"

He went below deck with the rest of my crew and shut the hatch above. I anxiously tried to start my pipe with a match but struggled to get it lit with the rough seas. I finally got the match lit after three clumsy strikes.

I took deep heaving breaths in with my pipe and began to panic. I was a sitting duck and that wave was still growing in the distance. Just then, Ramone abruptly entered the cabin with the door swinging violently behind him and said that the engine room was cleared of water and the diesels ready. I clumsily tried the key and the starter, but the boat wouldn't start. The accelerator was still in gear.

"Throw her in neutral, Trent! The throttle's still engaged!"

"She's in neutral, Cap." As he jammed the lever into the neutral gear.

"Start! Start girl!" I said as I held the starter with force.

I turned the key but could only hear the starter, until a moment later the sputtering as the diesels struggled to start. The cranking in the engine room was a glimpse of hope. The smoke started to puff out of the stack atop the deck. I could see Trent beginning to clutch the railing on the cabin dash. This was the first time I've seen him shook. But I was also shook in the face of this storm.

"That wave's approaching faster than I like, Cap," Trent said nervously.

"Again; throw that throttle forward, Trent."

"Yah!" Trent shouted back.

The smoke plumes from the stack grew thicker in the wind and storm. The cold wind and sprays of the sea started splashing my windows. I could barely see. The waves crested into the bow of the boat and nearly broke the windows of the cabin.

"I can't see Trent. How far's that rogue?"

"300 meters and closin' fast!"

"We gotta beat it to the top before the crest breaks!"

The huffing of the diesel smoke out of the stack was synchronized with my puffing of the pipe as I breathed quicker and my heart began to thump faster. I stared in awe at the sheer size of the wave approaching even though it was still young. The small crabbing boat was darting as fast as it could to the crest of the wave at full speed. Climbing up the wave, I saw Trent kiss a photo he keeps in his pocket watch. Ramone came into the cabin and gripped the desk to the back. He was drenched and his waders were waterlogged. I asked Ramone: "Where're the others?!"

"Jesse, Carl, and Declan in bilge with bunks! Bailing water!"

Hopefully, they're alright down there, I thought to myself. "We're almost to the top!" I yelled.

"This better be it or we ain't gonna make it!" Trent shouted back over the sound of the wind and the roar of the engines.

"Have faith, men!" I said reassuring them.

"The wave's startin' to break at the top!" Trent exclaimed.

The boat was chugging up the final stretch of the wave and started to tip backward with the nose up to a near 60 degrees. At the last moment before the boat was pulled down with the wave; the vessel rocketed up the crest of the wave and plummeted down the backside violently. Everyone was thrown about the cabin. The bow dipped under the water, then floated right back up quickly.

"Everyone okay?" I said getting my feet back under me.

"Yah, I'm good," Trent said, holding his arm.

"Ramone, check on Jesse and the rest below deck?" I asked.

"Sí," he replied.

The waves let up a bit as Ramone started to go below deck. I could see the blue skies colliding with the dark gray blustering clouds out to my starboard side. I turned the wheel over to the right to point the bow toward that promising window. After exiting the storm which seemed like its own treacherous biome, I realized my sweater was covered in blood and my nose was bleeding. Trent handed me a towel and said, "Here ya go, Cap."

"Thanks," I replied.

"Oh, and I foun' this by the cot," Trent said.

Trent handed me the metal piece that was in my pocket, a sobriety coin. It was my first anniversary at the last port. My eyes lit up and I fervently reached for the coin and cradled it in my hand. I grabbed the letter on the dash of the pilot house then picked up my pen

off of the floor and signed the paper. Outside was growing dark, and it was beginning to snow. It was peaceful and familiar.

"Thank yah, Trent."

"Any other orders, Cap?" Trent asked calmly.

"Second star to the Right and straight on til mornin'," I replied.

Student Name: Jacob Davidson  
Grade: 12  
School: St Thomas High School  
Title: Steel  
Category: Science Fiction & Fantasy  
Key: Silver Key  
Educator: Daniel Green

"Captain on Deck," came the call from a multitude of the bridge officers, swiftly standing to attention with a salute prepared across their brow.

"At ease, gentlemen." Captain Isaiah Glover surveyed the impressive deck of the warship Mercury; his warship. Powered by twin engines that took up nearly half the ship's length and bristling with armaments that hardly any crew member understood, the Mercury was a miracle of human technology. The third shift crew was full of life and hard at work across the bridge despite already being on duty for the past six hours. Isaiah swiftly approached the pilot's chair where Sergeant Markus was unstrapping himself from the bindings.

"It's not fair; you always get to have all the fun." Markus grinned and shook his head at the captain. Navy law had long ago decided that if at all possible, then the captain was to pilot the ship during any and all combat actions. This was not always possible as battle often comes by surprise and to change pilots mid fight would be ill advised, not to mention the death sentence that the captain would be facing during the trip from his quarters to the bridge. If the standing pilot had to perform any sharp maneuvers during the captain's journey, said captain would face an unseemly demise consisting of strong G forces and an even stronger corridor wall. Navy code also required first crew staff to be on duty during combat operations but they were all still fast asleep. Third shift who was familiar with the situation would be more than adequate.

Isaiah returned the Sergeant's smile and patted the younger man on the back. "The 'fun' will come and find you one day, but until that day you would do best to enjoy the quiet hours." Isaiah mounted the pilot's chair and methodically secured the restraints, any single loose strap could be extremely dangerous during combat, especially if it started whipping at the captain with the force of 10 Gs. "Sitrep, please" the captain called out.

"Two unidentified ships near the edge of the system; all attempts to hail have been met with silence. Their design matches no known ships from any species within the database, computer seems to think that they're based off some old Brin ships; but I don't see it." The report, fed into Isaiah's ear, came from Lieutenant Clark across the bridge. She had been a recent acquisition, expertly leading the scan staff, after her predecessor Hubert Tubs had needed to be replaced some months prior.

“Hail them again; tell them that this system is possessed by the Terran Empire and that under Terran law; they must leave.” Isaiah frowned as Lt. Clark relayed the message, wondering where these ships were from and how they had never been seen before in a very widely explored galaxy.

“No reply; Captain. Thermal sensors just hit the ships, they are dark. No signs of life or warmth. Those ships are dead.”

Isaiah began a soft burn of the engine in the vain hope that getting closer to these alien ships could somehow reveal a clue about their origin. Isaiah was still deep in thought when the bridge erupted into noise as the engines of the two alien ships blazed to life and began heading straight for the Mercury. “Prepare for battle, prepare for battle” Isaiah called out on the ship’s announcement system. Every crew member would need to wake themselves quickly and strap down.

“Look at the speed of them, Captain. That isn’t – it isn’t possible” came Clark’s astonished voice. Isaiah watched as the two ships approached at an astonishing speed that the inhabitants of Mercury could not rival. Isaiah looked down at the scan readings; the occupants of those ships would be feeling 15 Gs of force at that speed. Theoretically the human ship could match them, but those 15 Gs of force would kill any man aboard the ship. No known galactic species could survive those 15 Gs. The human max of 11 was on the high upper end of the galaxy and that force would often cause crew to fall unconscious; which was very bad in the heat of battle. The crew of the two ships would need to be made of steel to withstand the force.

The three ships began to approach each other as Isaiah continued to bark orders to the crew; detailing possible escape routes and attempting to determine just what the capabilities of those ships are. As they neared, Isaiah began laying out a spray of explosive rounds in the path of the ships; forcing them to dive below the Mercury at an advantageous angle. Isaiah smiled, two on one was a daunting task but the Mercury had faced far worse odds before and it had always triumphed.

These hopes were crushed as the bridge crew watched in horror as the two ships simply charged through the rounds, the most advanced human explosives detonating harmlessly on the seemingly impenetrable hull of the alien ships. The ships began to shoot out an immense spray of shells of their own; forcing the Mercury on the defensive. As some rounds began slipping through the defensive guns of the Mercury, Isaiah ordered that all power be directed to the defensive guns; ceasing the Mercury’s offensive fire.

“Bring about the starboard guns” came the call from Armscomp. Of course the captain had the option of ignoring an order from an officer below him, but only fools and captains with a death wish ignored a request from the men controlling the defensive guns; especially when these guns were the only ones firing. So Isaiah brought the Mercury around in a roll, bringing around fresh defensive batteries for the hail of bullets headed towards the ship. For the first time in both of their careers, Isaiah and the Mercury were

outmatched. As the three ships passed by each other the crew of the Mercury was granted a brief moment of respite.

“Do we have any reading on weaknesses or any idea on what these damn things are Clark?” Asked Isaiah through gritted teeth.

“No apparent weaknesses Captain. But when I was stationed in Rion we were told stories of some ancient machine race that was supposedly hiding on the edge of the galaxy. Some old Navy captain came through the system calling them the holy grail of military tech; said he had been looking for them. I think we found them. It explains how they gave no heat signals and how they can move so fast.”

Isaiah took a moment to process the news and announced to the crew; “we have to fight; there is no chance at escape. They’re far too fast. Set course for this system’s star; we will use its gravity as an advantage.

Isaiah throttled the Mercury’s massive engines, burning hard to reach the sun before the machines realized their plan.

“What happens if they don’t follow?” Asked Clark, voice strained.

“They have to, their existence is a secret and they’ve got no idea if we have backup coming. In their eyes we have to die; and we have to die soon.” Isaiah was proven right as the ships began their pursuit. “Load the bunker busters,” Isaiah ordered Armscomp through the radio. Huge steel rods that had been designed to punch through planetary bunkers during orbital bombardment would be enough to pierce the reinforced armor of the machine ships; but Isaiah would be putting an incredible amount of faith in the Armscomp officers to land such a difficult shot.

Mercury began climbing the gravity well of the star aiming for the top of the star; it would be nearly impossible for incoming rounds to hit the ship due to the strong force of gravity on them. As the machine ships began the climb too, quickly gaining on the Mercury, Isaiah realized that they would be intercepted before reaching the summit. “Get ready, we only have one shot,” Isaiah radioed to the Armscomp officers, praying that they would stay conscious during what he was about to do. Isaiah spun the Mercury around down the gravity slope, rocketing towards the machine ships at nearly the force of 12 Gs. Isaiah struggled to stay conscious against the forces attempting to pull the blood away from his brain as the Mercury approached the two ships. The machines had begun firing but the defensive batteries of the Mercury had caught everything so far; that would not last for long. Isaiah and the rest of the bridge crew felt the ship itself shake as the two massive bunker busters shot out simultaneously towards the ships. Isaiah watched from afar as the steel rods, accelerated by the speed of the ship, the force of their launch, and the gravity of the star, punch straight through the hulls of the ships, emerging on the far sides.

The bridge exploded into cheers as the two machine ships, now far behind them, lost all engine power and fell into the star; unable to fight the gravity of it. Captain Isaiah Glover just smiled, his old heart had nearly burst from this fight and he was not looking forward to the paperwork.

Student Name: Alice Zhang

Grade: 11

School: St. John's School

Title: Alice

Category: Poetry

Key: Silver Key

Educator:

Alice through the Looking Glass,

Did not see herself

Instead found she was not alone

So

She lifted her pale forearms and reached to the glass

Armed with firmness of feeling and realness of being

She skimmed the silver plane

—Memorized the taste of it on the tips of her fingers.

Did not like the stiffness of it

Willed it away

And by magic, by chance

Sheer luck, she would decide (because fate did not exist)

The metal

dipped.

Her trembling hands broke glass' surface

Broke through the stillness

Oh ecstasy!

To know whether Alice through the Looking Glass

Was Alice in the Looking Glass  
Who shivered when their eyes met  
Broke first away from met gaze  
Because she did not relish in being watched

Not in the hands  
of Alice, sick Alice  
Alice drunk on misery

Alice through the looking glass  
Stripped her bare  
Pawed at her shoulders and groped at her breasts  
Tugged at her hair and then examined the way it fell  
Gnawed a slow path up and down her body  
(She'd touched her before)  
She was cold and dull and numb

With practiced detachment  
clinical practicality  
Alice through the looking glass withdrew from her body  
Retreated from the looking glass from what she neither wanted nor despised  
Saw only that Alice in the Looking Glass  
Was real as real can be  
Moved and curved where one could do so and was solid in the rest

So  
She lied to Alice in the looking glass who did not quite know what to make of this  
Lied and lied and lied some more

Until Alice in the Looking Glass, gluttoned and stuffed with lies  
Went home and drowned herself in knowing  
In potions that shifted her blood and fat.

She would have killed for the key to her bones, to unlock them at their joints  
To rip apart her skin and sew it back up together again,  
Killed till her teeth fell out her mouth like candy  
Til her eyes sank back into their sockets  
Then  
Off  
went  
her  
head.

So  
Now Alice through the looking glass  
Could see herself no more

Student Name: Celina Zhao  
Grade: 8  
School: St. John's School  
Title: Apples on a Stick  
Category: Personal Essay & Memoir  
Key: Silver Key  
Educator: Michael Seckman

Heart thumping, dripping sweat, I walk into my new middle school in downtown Houston for only the second time in my life. The straps of my red bookbag, lumpy with all my gear, dig into my shoulders and knock heavily into my lower back with every step. I open my new red locker, whose combination I have rehearsed many times for this exact moment--right, left, right, click--to reveal science, history, math, and English textbooks neatly arranged, spines out. I heave my bag onto the top hook and remove my lunch box to hang it as well. Then I grab my Chromebook, my planner, and books for my first class before carefully navigating my way through the halls to morning advisory. On the way, I notice girls applying expensive mascara using their locker mirrors while excitedly catching up on the gossip of the summer.

In my first year of middle school, I was assigned to the Gray & Rose advisory, or as we began to call it: GRose. We met in the library, which was wonderful because we had tall spinny chairs and normal chairs as well as two sofas right in the middle of the greenhouse comic book section, the blanket adventure section, and the sticker-by-number section. A pretty cool spot. However, I couldn't help but notice that I was one of only two Asians in the mix, which was weird because throughout my K-5 education in Sugar Land, Texas, where I grew up, I was always one of many Asian Americans, and especially Chinese Americans.

During the first week of school, we were required to sit by advisory during lunch. That first day, I observed my advisory eating PB&Js and chips, their lunch bags loaded with snacks and fruit. I looked down at my meal of leftover fried rice and realized one of these things was not like the others. I felt so different--more of an outsider than ever before. I watched how my peers covered their mouths with their hands when they ate and was suddenly very aware of myself, head tilted down, stuffing my face with food.

I finished eating first and put my mask back on. From behind that protective barrier I continued to observe how everyone had shiny white straight teeth. During athletics, I watched girls in the locker room delicately apply deodorant, spritz pungent floral perfumes, and pull on lowrise Lulu shorts. In the mirror on the way out, I caught a glimpse of myself in off-brand sport shorts and freshly applied sunscreen that had left streaks of white around my temples. After PE the Lulu girls walked back to the locker

rooms like supermodels on a runway, long flowing hair blowing in the breeze, loose and easy. Meanwhile, I was drenched in sweat, shirt was sticking to my back, my hair a bedraggled hot mess. In class, I watched them open darling pencil bags revealing dozens of highlighters and pens, which they used to aesthetically decorate their notes.

The only class in which I felt most comfortable was my accelerated math course where my classmates and I furiously wrote notes on new complex topics and struggled mightily to conquer challenging problem sets. Because all of us were struggling and because I knew I would be studying with this class over the next three years (if I could keep up), I forced myself to ask questions and put myself out there to work with new partners. I quickly became good friends with two of them. As it turns out, we all have long straight black hair and similar experiences, if you catch my drift. We pushed each other to work harder and we found comfort in each other's arms. Without a doubt I was very happy when it was just the three of us, but in a class full of 120 students having two friends just barely scratches the surface, and I knew this.

In the blink of an eye, it was time for our 6th-grade Mo Ranch trip: one week of bonding in the wilderness. By that time, I could recognize everybody in my grade, but I still found it hard to hold a conversation beyond pleasantries. Little did I know, the Mo Ranch trip would change everything.

On the first day, my Mo Ranch group was met with the first of a series of challenges: the whole group lined up on a long log and we were told to organize ourselves in alphabetical order by surname. Clinging to each other, we couldn't help but get up close and personal with each other, which of course is the whole point. The formal wall was shattered and our personal spaces were squeezed tightly together as all that mattered was keeping everyone from falling off the log as we moved crab-like from one end to the other. Quite simply, it felt like life or death.

I remember standing at the very opposite end of where I needed to be. At first I just stood in my spot, waiting to see how things would shake out, a little hopeless about making it to the other side. Within several minutes, everyone, except for me, was in their spot. I had no option left but to move down the entire line. All eyes on me, palms sweating, legs shaking, I squirmed and pushed by every single person, faces so close I could smell their last meal. Mortified that I could be the one that fell and lost the challenge, clouds of fear formed around me. To my absolute delight, everyone tried their best to make room for me, grabbing my arms and hands, cheering me on as I picked my way down the log. When I reached the other side and the instructor told us we'd done it, we all jumped down shrieking with delight. The girls swarmed around me, and I was bombarded with floral hugs and all the guys smacked my hand with high fives as if I'd scored the winning goal. It was magical.

My least favorite challenge was the high ropes obstacle course: the same hanging wood planks you would see at Urban Air. Because I am afraid of heights, this quickly turned into

a nightmare. “What if I fall off?” “What if the rope or board breaks?” Unlike at Urban Air, I didn’t have any friends cheering me on or walking across the course with me. As the instructor was explaining the safety rules, I became even more nervous due to the fact that our lives were literally in the hands of the instructor. Literally. As I looked around, almost everyone was playing with their hair or staring at the ground and I felt comforted that I wasn’t the only one who would be taking the challenge. We all put on our heavy harnesses and our bulky helmets, feeling crushed under the pressure. We sat silently under a big tree, thinking about our fate. Out of nowhere, two girls started to play a hand clapping game called “Apple on a Stick”. Slowly, everyone started playing the game, too, going faster and faster until all our worries washed away.

We all completed the high ropes obstacle without any real drama, and I didn’t die or pass out from fear, but the impression that stayed with me was that schoolyard game of “Apples on a Stick”. From then on, it became our language. Whenever we were waiting around for the next challenge, we played it. It allowed me to forget my context. I forgot about my off-brand unstylish clothes that my mom had picked out, my straight black Asian hair and my crooked teeth. I felt like I was a being a true American, that I wasn’t an American-born-Chinese so much as I was an American with Chinese roots. To my surprise, I realized how little difference there actually was between me and the shiny Lulu girls.

For the rest of the Mo Ranch trip, we would continue to meet new challenges every day. We climbed the Mo pole, which felt like a hundred feet straight up in the air. We felt the wind lash our faces at the Big Gulp, a ginormous swing forty feet long. And we connected with each other in nature, outside of the cloistered halls of our middle school. We touched snakes, toads, peeing on a few of us, and tarantulas, crawling over our hands with tiny bunny-like feet. Swimming in the Guadalupe River surrounded by cypress trees wrapped tightly with poison ivy, I had the strange feeling of being in a movie.

Group activities also included more cerebral games like moving a ping-pong ball with only cardboard pieces and using different strings to drop objects in cans. We also had plenty of time to talk and get to know one another better. There was never a time when we were not moving or laughing. After a full day of being outside, we piled food onto our plates. But at every meal there was a scale with a bowl in which everyone was to put their leftover food. On the first day, the bowl was nearly filled to the brim. I too had thrown in the crust of my pizza. However, over the next few days, the bowl became emptier and the plates became cleaner. By the end of the trip, the bowl had barely anything in it and everyone was striving to serve themselves only what they could finish.

Throughout the Mo Ranch Trip, I saw acquaintances turn into friends. I found a connection with new friends and realized we were mostly the same, despite our looks. We all care about nature, we all want to grow and learn, we all make mistakes, we all goof off. But most important, we are the class of 2028.

Student Name: Elisa Feygin

Grade: 8

School: St. John's School

Title: Bane of the Waitress

Category: Humor

Key: Silver Key

Educator:

The feeling of getting someone fired is like that feeling you get when you're plummeting downhill on a roller coaster. You feel weightless, even giddy. Yet you still somehow feel in control, because you know that you're going to be safe no matter what. After all, roller coasters aren't designed to drop you. The only difference between a roller coaster and firing someone is that with the latter, you never really come down from the high. Watching their face fall is the most satisfying sensation; seeing the tears spring to their eyes just fills you with glee. And the best part? The horrified look they give you as you smile evilly at them, because they finally realize who they were dealing with when they denied you what you asked them for. What I'm trying to say is, the empowering feeling of ruining someone else's life just doesn't wear off.

Greetings. My name (not my real name - you honestly think I'd tell you that?) is Veronica. Veronica Dracopoulos. Getting people fired is one of my hobbies. How could something so atrocious be a hobby of yours, you might ask? And to that I say, what makes you think you deserve an explanation? I decided a long time ago that I am entitled to do, say, and enjoy whatever I want, life-ruining or not. After all, once one has been through what I have been through and accomplished what I've accomplished, I'd say a life of following one's whims is quite deserved. For example, I flew to Mykonos, Greece, half a year ago on business (confidential business). My stay was supposed to last two weeks. I have added another twenty-two, for the sole and simple reason that I like it here and I can definitely afford to stay. Will I leave soon? Perhaps. Perhaps not. People know where to find me; if they need to see me then they can pay for their own flights. Most people find me rather eccentric, though they prefer the term disagreeable. I happen to find myself perfectly delightful, but nobody listens to me anymore. Well, unless I scream at them. That always seems to get their attention. Like it did a little while ago, when I was planning a business luncheon for myself and a few of my top clients (my occupation shall remain a secret - I am the opposite of an open book).

It was a warm summer day in Mykonos, and I had some matters to discuss with my three highest-paying clients. The flight to Mykonos can be quite jarring for some (jet lag is no joke), so choosing the time was a complex and difficult equation (the list of my talents is lengthy - however, mathematics of any kind are not on it). After some serious consideration, I employed my extensive knowledge of fine dining and settled upon 1:45

PM. Not too early, not too late. Absolutely perfect for a luncheon. My chosen destination was a place called the Grecian Garden, a lovely, rustic little outdoor restaurant near my beachside condo. It's managed by one of my closest friends in the fine dining industry, Constantine. Let's just say that he really knows how to treat his regulars. Plus, they have the most exquisite tuna tartare. I called the restaurant, expecting the phone to be picked up by the usual hostess, a girl named Zoe. She always takes my reservations. Instead, however, some new girl picked up the phone.

"Good morning, this is the Grecian Garden. I'm Tina, how may I be of service?" she droned in a bored monotone. She earned my disapproval immediately, of course. It is vital to answer the phone politely and enthusiastically when working as a hostess in the world of fine dining. Everybody knows this. I put aside my vexation with this incompetent girl momentarily (I would have to speak with Constantine later about his hiring choices) so that I could make my reservation.

"Yes, hello. My name is Veronica Dracopoulos," I paused here, pacing the wooden floors of my apartment, expecting to hear the usual frantic "My goodness, Ms. Dracopoulos, what a pleasure. How may I help you?" I'm a bit of a household name - I won't go into why, but let's just say that I'm very, very used to getting what I ask for. But instead, this rude, insolent girl on the other end of the phone just snapped whatever sticky, artificially-sweetened gum she was chewing and responded,

"Okay, how may we be of service, Ms...Dracopoulos?" She put a snarky little emphasis on my last name, like she hadn't ever heard the name Dracopoulos. Please, darling, it's Greece. It's not that uncommon. I was more than a little annoyed with this girl at this point, but once again, I checked my temper. I settled down onto my light gray couch, crossing my legs and picking up the remote control. I was most definitely going to be binging Oprah after this.

"Yes, I'd like a reservation for 1:45; lunch for four, please," I told her politely. I expected to be immediately obliged, but instead this Tina girl paused, most likely checking the reservation schedule. This caused me to sit up straight from my relaxed position on the couch. How dare she? Everyone knows that when Veronica Dracopoulos asks for a reservation, no matter the time, you immediately grant her the reservation. Always. But this girl. This. Girl. She picked up the phone again, snapped her gum, and drawled,

"I'm sorry, we're unavailable at that time. Thank you for calling. Goodbye." As she was about to hang up the phone, I finally lost it.

"Now wait just a minute, young lady. I am Veronica Dracopoulos. Veronica [BLEEP]ing Dracopoulos. I expect my 1:45 reservation for four, available or not. Do you understand?" I snapped, standing from the couch.

"Chill, lady. It doesn't matter who you are, we're unavailable at 1:45. Don't call again," she retorted. And then she hung up.

I'd like to think that was the moment her career with the Garden ended.

I stood there for a moment, facing the wall of windows that looked out on the blue ocean, so shocked that I couldn't move. Usually the sight of the beach calms me, but I was too angry to care about the view. My phone was still clutched in my hand, which was trembling with rage. No one, and I mean no one, denies me, Veronica Dracopoulos, of anything. And there was no way that woman just told me to "chill". I called the restaurant three more times, four more times, seven more times, and the little brat refused to pick up the phone all seven times. At that moment, I decided to teach this insolent girl a lesson. I stormed down the stairs of my complex, grabbed my fur coat (yes, I am aware of my fabulousness), and threw open the front door. Usually I summon my driver whenever I have to go somewhere, but I was genuinely so preoccupied with trying not to throw something as hard as I could that I didn't care. I must have appeared quite strange to anyone watching me pass by: an angry-looking woman in a fur coat on a summer day. But that was the last thing on my mind as I reached the entrance to the Grecian Garden.

I threw open the door and took a moment to relish the stares I received as I stood imposingly in the threshold of the restaurant. I must admit, no matter the circumstance, the quiet beauty of the restaurant's interior never fails to steal my breath. The restaurant is mostly outdoors, umbrellas dotting the courtyard and shading the tables. Strung above the tables are little ropes of fairy lights, giving the whole place a golden glow. Flowers and ferns border the dining area, and small birds and butterflies flit around the customers. If one didn't know any better, it would seem as if they had walked into something resembling a fairy garden (complete with gourmet cuisine).

Anyways, after I finished my routine moment of grandstanding, I turned to the wait staff who were standing around the hostess' booth.

"Now," I surveyed them with my eyes, my voice dripping with rage, deadly and barely concealed. "Which one of you is Tina?"

They scrambled and shifted until one girl was left in the middle of their little cluster. It was not hard to tell that she was about to pee herself. Her eyes were wide with fear, and her hands were shaking. But I didn't care. I marched towards her, keeping my eyes locked on her terrified ones, and pulled my phone out. "I called you back about my reservation," I whispered furiously. "Seven. Times." My voice rose to a shout as I boomed, "Now go get me your manager!" This is usually the time when some poor, brave soul steps up and calls me a Karen (I, of course, annihilate them shortly afterwards with just a glare from under my exquisite lashes). But these kids must have had some common sense, because almost all of them went running to find the manager of the restaurant, who, as I mentioned, just happens to be one of my favorite people, Constantine. The only one who stayed back was Tina, still frozen in place with terror and trembling like a leaf. I offered her my most malevolent smile and whispered, "I'd recommend starting up the job search as soon as possible...you'll need it."

Finally, one of the kids came back with Constantine. Ah, what fun it was to see my old friend. That day he was wearing his favorite burgundy suit (it compliments his tan skin beautifully), his jet-black hair gelled so excessively it seemed like it should have been illegal. His eyelids and ridiculously defined cheekbones were tastefully sprinkled with rhinestones (he likes his sparkles), which matched the massive, glittering rocks in his ears. He immediately screamed with joy at the sight of me and hugged me enthusiastically.

As Constantine and I exchanged pleasantries, I shot Tina, our favorite hostess, a sharp glare, watching her jaw drop in surprise at my friendship with the manager.

"So, Ronnie, what brings you down here? There must be something you've been refused if you've deigned to visit us lowly peasants - we all know you despise not getting your way," Constantine teased. I rolled my eyes.

"Well, Constantine, as you know, I have some important clients in town this weekend, and I wanted to have a luncheon to discuss business details. I'm afraid one of your hostesses -- (another glare in Tina's direction) -- has been giving me some trouble about the 1:45 reservation I wanted today," I explained. Constantine laughed.

"Ah, that explains it. Tina's new around here, so she wasn't aware of the existence of our resident self-proclaimed royalty. You'll have to excuse her." He took one look at my face and sighed, shaking his head. He knew very well that I would excuse nothing and no one. He turned to the unlucky hostess. "Tina?"

"Yes, sir?" she responded, her voice quaking almost as much as her hands. Constantine showed off his blindingly white teeth in a large, condescending smile.

"You're fired."

Victory.

After Tina was dismissed (serves the brat right), Constantine and I caught up, laughing and chatting as we walked around the beautiful restaurant. I bid Constantine farewell before I called my private car to drive me back to my estate. I know it's only a few blocks away, but what self-respecting woman would want to walk home in a fur coat on a summer day? I'm sorry, but I just don't do the whole sweat thing. Plus, there's nothing more satisfying than getting some idiot fired, riding in a fancy car, and looking fabulous all the while.

As I waited for the car, I took in my surroundings, marveling at this paradise that I've decided to call home (well, for the last six months, at least). The beach was in sight from the restaurant's front porch, its aquamarine waters glimmering in the late morning sun. Families played and laughed on the sand, gulls soaring above. I smiled to myself as I watched the palm trees swaying hypnotically in the breeze, watched the happy people on the beach, watched the jewel-colored waters break in waves and wash against the white

sand. It's moments like these that make all of the skeptical, disrespectful, annoying people worth it. Because I get this, and they don't.

So, I got my reservation. Obviously. How could I not have? I've quite literally got Constantine and the entirety of the Grecian Garden eating out of the palm of my hand. But as I got into my car and told my personal driver where to take me, I couldn't help but wonder if I might have been a little softer on that girl. What I mean is, was getting her fired really the way to go? I've never really doubted my methods. I've built myself up from nothing and had to put up with countless disrespectful people without being able to stand up for myself. Don't I deserve to push people around now that I can afford to? Or should I have given Tina the chance to redeem herself before I pulled my (metaphorical, of course) trigger? I contemplated all of this as I raised my coffee, purchased to-go from the Garden before the car got here (a plain dark roast, no milk or sugar; just how I like it), to my lips, preparing to take a sip. Just then, the driver slammed the brakes to avoid running a red light. At that moment, everything seemed to move in slow motion; the coffee exploding out of the cup, my horrified exclamation. Suddenly, the scalding hot coffee was everywhere. All over the backseat, all over my expensive clothes, all over my hair, burning and staining and ruining everything. Any contemplations of right and wrong and "to fire or not to fire" seemed to leave my mind as I tilted my head up and met the driver's terrified eyes in the rearview mirror. I suspect he knew what I was going to say to him before the words even left my mouth...

"You. Are. FIRED!!!"

Student Name: Katharine Yao

Grade: 11

School: St. John's School

Title: Drumming up a storm: After 43 years; Drum Corps is still the heartbeat of school spirit

Category: Journalism

Key: Silver Key

Educator: DAVID Nathan

Friday night home football games boast a number of off-field traditions — Lower School kids running around the playground, tiny wannabees fangirling the cheerleaders in front of the bleachers, Upper School fans clad in jungle- or fluorescent-themed outfits — and all of it to the drumbeats in the background, courtesy of the Rushmore Academy Drum Corps.

The seven percussionists that make up the Drum Corps play for lunchtime Upper School pep rallies and home football games, where they sit at the top of the bleachers above the Upper School student section. Drum Corps captain Terry Connor said that drumming helps them feel more connected with the football games.

“When I’m in Drum Corps, I’m not just going to sit and watch this game,” Terry said. “I’m going to spend time with my friends, do something that I like doing and watch this game.”

Drum Corps usually meets before school once or twice a week in the first-floor hallway of the science building, where the captains lead the crew to drum quietly on the carpet. They wait for pep rallies and actual games to haul out the toms, snares and bass drum out of the drum closet.

“Drum Corps are the ones who make the most noise to hype students up,” sophomore Bella Silva said. “It adds an element that would definitely be missing if we didn't have them, and it's unique from other schools because they don't have that as a part of a football game.”

A group of Upper School students with a shared love for percussion founded Drum Corps in 1980 as a revival of the Rushmore Drum and Bugle Choir from the 1950s.

Jack Maxwell ('82) played on Drum Corps for the first three years of its revival, practicing a few days a week after school, and, once the program gained more traction, during PE in lieu of a sport. Maxwell likened his group to the irreverent Marching Owl Band at Rice University.

“We were essentially making noises: nothing polished, nothing together — just being goofs to try to get some spirit going,” Maxwell said.

These casual get-togethers turned into a more integral part of school spirit. Before long, Drum Corps was attending football games and traveling to away games on the cheerleader bus.

In the 1980s, the drummers and cheerleaders did not run in the same social circles, yet everyone was willing to work together in the name of school spirit.

“We realized we were on the same team,” Maxwell said. “You do your thing, we’ll do ours and we’ll work together.”

By the end of the 1980s, Drum Corps entered a kind of heyday.

“Mostly, we were all just playing the basic stuff,” former Drum Corps member Kate Connor (’90) said. “But then the people who really knew what they were doing would throw in extra things and add to it, so it became this very rich, layered set.”

Students introduced hip-hop-inspired music to Drum Corps’ repertoire during this time.

“It felt like a sneaky way of bringing hip-hop music to the mainstream at Rushmore football games,” said Gerald Cotillard (’89), who played for the local band Banana Blender Surprise with several other students on Drum Corps. “We were all very proud of that.”

Among the beats introduced during Cotillard’s time is Drum Corps staple “Tricky,” which originates from hip-hop group Run-D.M.C.’s 1986 song “It’s Tricky.” This beat usually accompanies cheerleaders at pep rallies.

The long tenure of “Tricky” on Drum Corps’ repertoire surprised Cotillard.

“It was just one of the songs that we were hearing in our heads and tapping to in class, and then we played it on the drums. We’re very appreciative that it’s lasted.” But he never thought much about building an enduring legacy for Drum Corps. His thought process more closely resembled “there’s a drum, I have a stick, I’m going to hit it.”

In the ’80s, even the middle school had a Drum Corps offshoot, run by math teacher Kori Knox, who had been on her high school’s flag corps and the Rice University Marching Owl Band. Knox was the sponsor of Middle School Drum Corps from its founding in 1987 to its last year in 2006.

Drum Corps’ beats are passed down from year to year through the captains, who teach the beats they know to younger members.

“They’re still playing a lot of the same beats that we were playing back then,” Kate said.

But she remembers plenty of songs that have since been lost to Drum Corps history. Terry has a collection of videos of slowed-down beats for new drummers to follow at

home, which they hope to expand into a proper, continuously updated catalog so that Drum Corps does not have to worry about songs being forgotten as captains graduate.

The Connor family borrowed drums from Rushmore to record videos of Kate playing some beats. Terry stood on a chair and held a phone over their mother's head to get a bird's-eye video of the drum.

Kate was thankful for the opportunity to play the drums after so long.

"Whenever I would hear them playing, I had to physically restrain myself from wanting to sit down in the stands and join them," she said. "There was something really special about Drum Corps — it was a really cool thing to be a part of."

Student Name: Kaviya Dhir  
Grade: 10  
School: St. John's School  
Title: Elegy in a Sherbet Cup  
Category: Poetry  
Key: Silver Key  
Educator:

The river's current is  
jagged, fierce, slashed  
as you and I  
pet the water with our twinkle toes  
laughing to fill our hearts  
with the bubbles of orange juice  
that glide down our throats, only to  
later dive through the crisp air  
in rhythmic burps, snorts that raise  
our nose hairs until they're stood straight.

Our violent laughter rumbles  
through our celestial bodies  
sucking our souls from our lips—  
we ache, so we clasp our ribs,  
their serrated curves piercing through  
our walnut skin's rubbery layer of honey  
once our malnourished figures  
have crinkled into tinfoil balls.

We are weak, so we gaze

at each other  
in a drunken stupor. We are  
unalive, unaware.

Your pupils, dear friend, are mirrors  
reflecting my innocence, my youth—  
cerulean navy bulging through  
the silk sleeve covers of your eyelids,  
shattering the moral mirrors  
of your crescent opal eyes.  
I am no longer yours—no longer  
your innocent, young companion.

“Your eye is swollen!”

I watch blood seeping, dripping  
from your eyelashes—  
I scream, as you laugh. You laugh  
like we are still twelve, tossing pebbles  
into the river as rainbow sherbet  
sugars our callouses. Now, you smile  
with gala apple cheeks  
blushing pink.

You smile and you rub your eye  
until the pupil blood-bursts.  
I scream. I scream and you melt  
my innocence, my youth. Our friendship

of sugared laughter is gone.

I am old, but you are young  
as I sit here by this river—  
my cracked toes petting  
the water's edge alone. Hovering  
above the stream, I cry  
salty pebbles into the memory  
of rainbow sherbet coating my hand.

I am old now. You are young forever.

Student Name: Elizabeth Hu  
Grade: 11  
School: St. John's School  
Title: Events of a True Crime Podcast  
Category: Short Story  
Key: Silver Key  
Educator:

AM: Hello everybody, this is your host Alejandro Martinez and welcome back to another episode of Twisted Psyches, your favorite true crime podcast. Today, we're delving into the murder of a 42-year-old single father, Jacob Howards. Twelve years ago, his body was found in his house after his neighbors alerted the police that he hadn't left his residence in three days.

AM: Howards moved to 8814 Village Road in Sulfang, California over 20 years ago with his three-year-old daughter, Claire Howards. Sulfang was quite a small place, with only a population of 5,000 people. He worked as a bartender in Barnstein's Brewery and, much like the town he lived in, was quiet and mainly kept to himself, according to his colleagues. He had a set routine: every morning at 8, he would drop his daughter off at Sundew Elementary and return home, maybe running errands along the way. At 3 p.m., he would pick her up, go back home, and then leave the house again at 6:50 p.m., not returning until after 2 a.m.

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I wake up in a frenzy and look at the clock. Am I late? 11:35 p.m. I still have two and a half hours until daddy gets home. Okay. Okay. I'm not late yet. I can still sleep. Gotta get as much sleep in as I can. Before daddy shuts the door and starts throwing things around. I blink and fall back onto my pillow, calming my racing heart.

The sound of the door unlocking wakes me up. Oh no. Oh no. This is bad. I scramble out of bed and rush to the front door, but it is too late.

He screams at me, but his voice is overridden by my drumming heart as I rush to the door. His words cut off as he kicks me in the stomach. I retch and gasp and clutch my middle. Is this real? Or am I dreaming? It's so hard to tell.

A few words make it through the dim haze, but I don't even bother trying to make out what he says. He pokes me in the forehead with each enunciated word. Another sentence is uttered before he smacks me into the wall, sending my body flailing through the air like a limp rag doll.

"Wake up!"

My eyes fly open. I'm gasping for breath. Back is sticky. My daddy is loud. He's noisy. He just never, ever shuts up.

The memories of the last few moments are foggy, covered by a soft filter.

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SJ: Yeah, I mean, he never really talked to us. Occasionally he'd attend our little neighborhood gatherings for back-to-school or New Year's, but he'd always be off to the side, not smiling, not talking to anyone. That daughter of his always clung to his side. I remember trying to talk to them once in 1997, '98, but he was always really guarded. Didn't let his kid talk either. Just came and went.

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Daddy never lets me go outside. Or talk to anyone. The nice man diagonal from our house always says hi to me and offers me candy but daddy won't even let me raise my arm. He'll yank it away the second I try. I tell him that it hurts, but he doesn't listen. Says he's a pe-do-phile. I don't know what that means but Daddy's always yelling at me. His mouth is always moving, always open. Why can't it stay shut? If only I could keep his lips together forever. Then I wouldn't hurt so much. So loud. So noisy.

I'd move to cover my ears, but that would hurt, too.

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SJ: He kept getting suspicious about some van. Said he saw me driving one around. It's just a white van. Nothing to get so hissy over

AM: That was Sloan Johnson, one of Howards' neighbors. Johnson described the night of the incident, April 6, as "unusual."

SJ: He came back much earlier than usual. I remember hearing the slam of his car door and checking the clock because I was usually never awake when he returned home. It wasn't even 12:30 a.m. But I didn't think much of it.

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The door unlocks. I am on the couch, waiting, as always. The monsters come when I'm asleep. Except I can't tell whether I'm awake or asleep anymore sometimes.

He's early. Why is he early?

As always, his words bumble around, with only bits and pieces registering in my head: "sick...don't... bother...bad...splitting..."

He walks into his room and slams the door. The noise echoes around the house, magnifying his threat. He'll kill me. He'll split my head wide open. He said the word "sick." Again. He's always saying that word. Sick. I'm sick. Sick in the head. Mental sickness. He's sick. The word reverberates. Why can't it just stop moving? I have to stop it. I have to stop the noise. It's loud. Too loud. I need to fix the problem at its—at its roots.

My body rises on its own. First things first. The sound needs to be stopped.

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AM: None of the neighbors thought much of it. Maybe he was just feeling sick. Maybe his daughter was ill. There could be a plethora of reasons, but the question of why he returned early that day will forever be unanswered, as the only one who truly knows why is now six feet under. His body was discovered by Martha Wollsop on April 9.

MW: I was walking my dog, Lucy, past his house when my lil Lucy suddenly started going feral. Barking, growling, like he was both trying to get away from and attack the house. He's a sweet baby, so I was so confused about why he was going bonkers. After a few minutes of standing in front of their house trying to calm my pup, I smelled it too. A foul, rotten stench. It made my hair shrivel up. I remembered that both he and his daughter hadn't been outside in three days, and only now was I starting to worry about something worse than a fever. I immediately went home and called the police.

911: 911, this line is recorded. What's your emergency?

MW: Hi, um, could you please send someone to 8814 Village Road? There's an awful stench coming out from that place and the people living there haven't, um, shown themselves in quite a while. I was- I was just walking my dog, and I noticed the smell.

911: Ma'am, I'm not sure if a foul stench is enough to dispatch an officer. You would have to contact the house's owner for that.

MW: Please, sir, just to check it out. I'm awfully sorry but my little Lucy suddenly started barking and everything. He never does that.

911: Alright, I'll send someone over.

AM: Lucy, a 94-pound fully grown male Dobermann, was right to trust his instincts. The police showed up that evening at 11:27 pm and rang the doorbell. When no one

answered, the police, believing the house's residents might be in danger, knocked the door down. There, they witnessed a gruesome sight.

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It's sticky. The red paint covers my arms and my face. I can't peel it off. It's coming from him. I'm covered in it. The bed is covered in it. I'm absorbing it. The red infuses my hair, infuses my clothes. I feel stuck. Stuck in red. Red. Red.

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MW: I've never seen anything like it. In all my 83 years of living, even after everything I've been through in my life, I have never seen anything as terrible as that.

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I hear a dog barking. It disturbs my quiet. The pounding, the banging on the door. Why does it have to be so loud?

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AM: Howards was found in his bedroom, dead. His limbs had been chopped off, and his face, especially his mouth, had been stabbed multiple times. His mouth wasn't even a mouth anymore, just a giant bloody hole. He was lying in a pool of stagnant blood. Knife slashes covered every inch of his skin. But most chilling of all was his 11-year-old daughter covered in blood, her right hand still holding a bloody kitchen knife. She looked up as the police burst into the house with guns drawn but didn't say anything.

AT: I got scared. Me, a 28-year-old man, scared of an 11-year-old girl. But if you had seen her eyes that day, you'd have [redacted] your pants too. She was all emaciated and skin and bones, like all the water had been sucked from her. I'm not superstitious or anything, but I really felt like I was looking at something supernatural.

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The men are loud. They are so incredibly loud. I want to stop their noise too. A pang strikes my lower body. My legs hurt.

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AM: That was Arnold Thuln, one of the first responders on the scene. He was the one who placed her in custody and drove her to the police station, where she was thoroughly interrogated.

AT: We got a confession to the crime, but other than that, not much information. She just said one thing over and over: he's noisy. We asked if she meant Jacob Howards was noisy — she said yes. The fingerprints on her knife and everything matched the victim's body. Irrefutable evidence that she was the murderer. After a few questions, she kind of just shut up. No matter what, she kept mum.

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Why are you asking me these questions? Can't you just be quiet? It's so noisy. Noisy. Noisy. If I'm quiet, will you all also be quiet? Won't you be quiet?

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AM: Those are the facts. Claire Howards killed her father, Jacob Howards, on April 6, 2002 and has received a life sentence in prison. Now for the theories. Why, exactly, did Claire murder her father?

We already mentioned her tendency to complain about her father's noise. But, as we've heard from neighbors and colleagues, Howards was not a loud man. At least, not in public. As for his private life, well, none of us are privy to that. Which begs the question: what other disparities did Howards have between his private and public life?

The answer most likely lies with Claire, even if indirectly. Dorothy Lan, a medical professional with the police force, was able to tell us more.

DL: We have reason to believe Claire suffers from some sort of mental illness. She frequently punches herself in the stomach, even though it clearly hurts her. Even when no one is saying anything, she'll mutter to herself about the noise and wanting it to be quiet. She never seems to fully fall asleep, maybe sometimes in a dream state but never in a deep sleep. Likely some sort of oneirophrenia, but without her cooperation, we can't tell what mental illness she has for sure. Not to mention, her body was bruised when we saw it.

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The purple and red flowers bloom. Daddy barks at me to cover it up, and I do as he says, if only to make him stop yelling. The long-sleeved shirts are hot and suffocating and cover the flowers. The flowers are only on my stomach, thighs, and upper arms. Daddy doesn't put them anywhere else. They disappear after a few days, rinsing away in wind and warm water.

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DL: My initial thought was that the bruises were from the victim struggling to escape his murderer, but some of them don't exactly match up with that explanation. Howards was in bed when he was murdered. There was no evidence of substances in his bloodstream at the time of his death. So how did an eleven-year-old girl overtake this middle-aged, perfectly healthy man? She might have suffocated him with a pillow before proceeding to mutilate him. If she pressed her entire body weight on the pillow, he, still groggy from sleep, might not have been ready for the attack. But that doesn't explain the bruises on her stomach. If he was being suffocated, he most likely would have tried to flip her over or loosen her grip. The fresh bruises on her arms and back confirm this. But not the stomach. That's just unnatural. What's more, the bruises on her stomach seem to have been inflicted many times over many years.

I also noticed a lot of faded temporary tattoos. Almost confused them for bruises.

DL: The angle of the bruises say a lot too. Bruises from an external, intentional force have a different depth and angle than external, accidental bruises, which have a different depth and angle than self-inflicted bruises. We had all three.

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There. That mouth of his, the source of all the noise, opens up like a cavern. It snores. Even when daddy isn't awake, that stupid mouth still makes so much noise. I have to stop it. I have to stop the noise. I clamber on top of him and search for anything to muffle the sound.

A pillow. That'll work, right? I grab it and place it over the sound. There. The noise is quieter.

Stop moving. Stop screaming. My ears hurt. They hurt. I press harder on the source of the pain. Stop hitting me. Stop hitting me.

I press harder on his mouth, ignoring the blows. Ignore. Ignore. Ignore.

Finally.

The noise is gone.

I lift up the pillow and peer curiously at the cause of all the noise. It's still open.

I push it closed. It opens again. I push it closed. It opens. Closed. Open. Closed.

I lose my patience and close it permanently.

\*\*\*

AM: Her analysis raises a lot of questions. Did Claire frequently trip over one thing in one area? Was Claire being bullied? Or was there something more sinister behind Claire and her father's relationship?

DL: But a few bruises aren't enough to accuse anyone of anything. That's when I noticed something else: her left arm.

AM: Claire was left-handed up until age 7. Then she suddenly switched to her right hand. This is evident in Claire's old elementary assignments. Her handwriting improved from ages five to seven, but at seven years old, her handwriting suddenly plummeted before slowly improving again. This is in line with an x-ray. There is a crack in her left ulna. She did get a cast, but it seemed to have been taken off prematurely, causing the arm to never fully heal.

\*\*\*

I look at daddy's arms. There they are. Those arms hurt me. They crushed me from the back, consuming me, trapping me. They pinned me down. My arm bent. I begged it to stop, that it hurt, my arm hurt in this position, but nobody moved. Bent back. Backwards. Backwards. It hurts so, so much. What did I do? What did I even do?

Snap. Wails. Laughter.

I look at the severed arms. The knife didn't go through easily. But they'll never be able to hurt me again.

What did I do? What did I just do?

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DL: The weird thing about the crack and the broken arm in general is that it wasn't a natural sort of break. Broken arms in kids are everywhere, but they're always clumsy, spontaneous breaks, if you know what I mean. Claire's arm was clean. Almost like it had been bent slowly, little by little. Deliberately. That's the word. Claire's broken arm almost seemed deliberate. But again, that's hardly anything to go off of. It's a little more clear for the cuts.

AM: Claire was covered in scars up and down her upper arm. Not in a self-inflicted way, though—the angle at which the sharp object was held, based on the degree and depth of the cut, was different from someone inflicting pain on themselves. Most likely, it came from an outside source.

\*\*\*

I lift myself up from the floor. I look out the window. That's where daddy is right now, in the backyard. He's burying something. I think I recognize the thing he's burying. There's some sharp things. Clear. Glass. Told me to stay away. A patchwork on top of brown. Amorphous shapes with five protrusions. Gloves? A long strip of black with a silver head that constantly hisses and lunges and stings my skin. A belt? A snake? Both. All three things are stained red. They're gone underground. Maybe that means I won't see them again?

The glass was pretty. They reflected in the light and tinkled like chimes. They drew me to them.

\*\*\*

Right now, if you're thinking that Claire was abused by her father from a young age, you wouldn't be alone. But that narrative isn't solid either. Some of her long-term bruises and scars are up to 9 years old. That is, they were inflicted when she was two. But that sort of abuse had to have shown itself in the abuser as well—bruised knuckles, scuffed belts, glass shards, that sort of thing.

The police investigated every area around his house in a five-meter radius. Nothing appeared anywhere, not in the trees, not underground, nada. And Howards didn't have a

single glass bottle in his house. His hands showed no sign of fighting. His belts seemed frayed due only to time.

For every step forward, it seems, we've taken two steps back.

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Peace. It's so quiet in here. They placed me in a separate room after I tried to quiet someone else. She just wouldn't shut up. It's so nice. So quiet.

\*\*\*

The authorities never figured out the motive behind Howard's murder. But the perpetrator was undoubtedly Claire, who was held at a juvenile detention center until she was eighteen, then moved to a maximum security prison. She has refused to say anything about the incident, and so, we can only guess.

Thanks for listening, this has been Alejandro Martinez, and I'll see you next week, where we investigate a cold-blooded husband who—

Click. The recording ends abruptly.

Student Name: Alice Zhang  
Grade: 11  
School: St. John's School  
Title: Fruits; Fights; and the Distance Between Us  
Category: Personal Essay & Memoir  
Key: Silver Key  
Educator:

After a fight, my dad brings me fruit. Apples, bananas, grapes, pears, strawberries, watermelons—I am well acquainted with tears and summer fruits. I can count on his heavy footsteps thudding up the stairs to prelude his downcast gaze and the plate in his hands. It is his peace offering: the closest symbol of our fractured relationship I indulge in. When he sets the plate down at my desk with luck we will both say sorry, but most days the exchange is wordless. The fruit is ever-changing, often tart, sometimes sweet, but always delicious and rich in flavor. I love summer fruits, and they will always remind me of my dad, because, me and my dad, we don't know how to talk to each other.

The distance between our lives is measurable. I can count the years and miles between them. My dad grew up poor, running along riverbanks in a small province in southeast China, setting fire to brushes of grass near his school. In contrast, I grew up with the American dream. My life, set in motion by the struggles and tenacity of my parents, was ideal. I spent my days idling in front of screens, letting the flicker of blue light pass the time between hours spent in rich private schooling. I indulged in the niceties, a room all to myself, my own phone, and time spent leisurely. Our identities are tied to countries seas apart, and we may speak the same languages but it doesn't matter what we say when we can't understand each other.

There was once a time in my life when he would try—try to help me understand him better. Every night I would fall asleep to my dad murmuring stories from his childhood. I learned about Sun Wukong, a monkey born from stone, and Chang'e who loved her husband so much she became the moon. He told me about how he raised chickens in his backyard and where he learned to spin pencils so cleverly. He sang his own praises and he lamented the befallings. Night by night and word by word, from the bits and pieces he deigned to share with me, I rebuilt the image I knew of my father. Perhaps in doing so I blurred the line between myth and story, story and reality. I would still be up hours after he left, staring at the ceiling romanticizing a life that was not mine. I was seven years old, and I would pray to a God I didn't believe in that I would wake up one day having lived in China all my life. I desperately believed that one day, by some miracle of faith, the stories of his childhood could be mine. It was a hopeless endeavor driven by my desire to know my dad: If I had grown up in the same place, speaking the same language as my dad,

then, equipped with an understanding of his life, one day we would be able to talk with each other.

We still don't talk much. As it stands, I can count the number of times we talk to each other each day on one hand:

One: Around two months ago my dad made me buy an alarm clock. He was tired of constantly yelling at me to get up, especially the constant ringing of seven different alarms set in two-minute intervals. I bought a proper alarm clock, ticking and everything. In the beginning, it worked. I began waking up without his intervention, and we avoided what were previously early morning arguments that easily turned into fights. Over time, the system faltered. I set my alarm too early and begin to snooze them until time runs out. I neglect to set an alarm in the first place, and at one point I begin sleeping through the sound of the alarm. We begin fighting again, because according to him, "I don't appreciate his time." He is generally right, so I pout and retreat, unable to find myself in a winning situation. In this way, the conversation is over.

Two: Morning continues in the car. I keep a small blanket in the back because I don't sleep well. It is sherpa and light pink and my dad begrudgingly allows it. The car rumbles, and as we pull out of the garage and light filters through the glass I shut my eyes and take a nap. Car rides with my dad used to be worse. It was a time when conversations could not be avoided because we were confined in one small space together. He pushed conversation, and I would grasp at words to string together, a sentence or two, never more. I was—am never willing to share. If a conversation becomes too tedious I pull the blanket over my head and duck down underneath it, like prey burrowing to escape from a predator. I close myself off because I am scared of being vulnerable. There is no way for our conversation to begin, no easy avenue for us to walk down. The gates to my thoughts are shut and we spend most of our time trying to pry them open. I could talk, and the idea of it frustrates my dad to no end. It would be so simple for me to open my mouth and begin speaking, but in the car with my dad, my thoughts tie themselves up into knots and sentences constrict themselves in my throat. I could open my mouth, but I terrify myself against figuring out how.

Three: Sometimes when my mother and brother come home late, dinner is just me and my dad. It is a solemn affair. We eat silently with the kitchen lights off just in case our new neighbors are peeping through the windows. My dad makes Chao Fan, fried rice, and Tudou Si, stir-fried shredded potatoes. Before I get up from the table he stops with a question—he asks me how my day went. I don't know. I never have an answer. Years and years of this same routine and I am still caught off guard whenever it plays out. My day was fine, fine, but apparently, that is unacceptable. Words stick like tar to my throat.

“你可以就说什么吗。” (Can you at least say something.)

“我说过了！还可以，是还可以。我先有spanish然后math—” (I did! Fine, it was fine. I had Spanish first, then math—)

“Okay, 还有呢？” (Okay, and?)

“我不知道, okay? 呢就是我的天, 我不知道我还得说什么。” (I don't know, okay? That was my day, I don't know what else I'm supposed to say.)

“我不关心你上了什么课。告诉我一些更有意思的事，想；你跟你朋友们说话了吗？你学了有趣的东西了吗？” (I don't care about the order of your classes. Tell me something interesting, like; did you talk to your friends? Did you learn something fun?)

“Yes, 我跟我friends说话了。我每天跟他们说话，okay? 和我不知道啊，不自得了。” (Yes, I talked to my friends. I talk to them every day, okay? And I don't know, I don't remember.)

“为什么你每次什么都不能告诉我？” (Why is it that every time we talk you can't tell me [anything]?)

“我有，我刚有！我不知道你要听什么，有很多。I wouldn't be able to say it all” (I did! I just did. I don't know what you want to hear, there's a lot. I wouldn't be able to say it all.)

“那你不能就选吗？” (Then can't you just choose?)

My Chinese is sketchy—painful and stilted, each word limps out of my mouth, injured and bruised sounding just plain wrong. We make do. In one minute we say more words to each other than we have all morning and afternoon. Still, somehow the conversation isn't over, and more is expected from me. My mouth opens then closes, then opens right up again: I am a fish caught out of water. All I do is stall, and all the while my dad stares at me, expectant. I never hold his gaze, and it is a sore point that is also brought up often when I am reprimanded. My eyes never reach past his lips, because there is nothing to see besides the way his tongue glistens and how spit flies from his mouth and sticks itself onto me. There may be genuine worry and heartbreak in his eyes, but I choose not to check.

Maybe he expects a lot from me because he has high expectations—or maybe having a conversation with your dad is the bare minimum in nurturing a father-daughter relationship. Our conversation always escalates. I am awful at keeping it going, and my dad gets frustrated. We hurl words at each other because it is a fight now. A one-sided fight where I cower and refuse to fight back because at this point it would be all too contradictory to begin talking now. At some point, he is yelling at me, and there is water clinging to my cheeks. It may be sweat or tears or spit, either way, it's just water, but my dad sees it and he bristles. We are both so emotional. There is nothing less we want to do than hurt each other. My mouth can open and my tongue can move, but the conversation

is beyond saving and still nothing will come out. Even when we fight I can not manage more than a quiet, “no.” A one-sided fight means nothing because I fall with ease and when blood begins to spill neither of us has gained anything.

Fleas stuck in a jar condition themselves to never leave the jar. They fly up and down in the sealed container, trapped and looking for a way out. When enough time has passed and the lid is lifted they can not fly out, they remain stuck in the up-and-down pattern. My dad and I fight nearly every day, and I never change. Still, somehow, my dad keeps trying, and when we fight he hopes I fight back. He keeps believing that today’s the day I muster the courage to say a word, to raise my sword and strike back—to not fail before trying. Sometimes our conversations go alright: we chat about my friends, the weather, and even a fond memory. We sit out on the pool deck with a bowl of strawberries, our hands sticky and sweet from the glistening red fruit. In between bites of a large strawberry, my dad showed me how to crack open sunflower seeds with my teeth. I fail, but I keep trying. When I look into my dad's eyes there is heartbreak, but there is also hope. He pours out his love for me, faithful that one-day things will change.

When I wake up I still need my dad, but I am faster now, and growing less dependent. My dad lets me sleep in the car, a pink Sherpa blanket pulled up to my chest, but not over my head. At home, we have our highs and lows. It is still difficult to talk to him, but I get better. I hold out for the future: I let myself have hope too.

Student Name: Maya Lester

Grade: 8

School: St. John's School

Title: Furry Hero

Category: Short Story

Key: Silver Key

Educator: Judy Adams

"Ugh, that filthy dog is back on our front porch," Jay's mom complained, hand clutched onto an old newspaper. She was about to swat the dog away with the newspaper as if he was a mosquito when Jay ran down to stop her. "Are you going to shoo that dog away again?" Jay's mom asked, her hand on her hip and the other still tightly grasping the newspaper. "Don't get bit," she warned. "I won't be able to hear you scream, and you know I am not about to be paying hospital bills." Jay nodded in compliance, and Jay's mom strutted to her bedroom, mumbling to herself about her deadbeat ex-husband and how he refuses to give her money.

Jay knew his dad loved him to the moon and back, but Jay's dad and mom would argue all the time, and soon his dad had had enough. Jay's dad had always protected Jay from everything the world threw at him; he knew that life was hard being disabled. Jay's dad had lost an eye as a kid, and he had struggled to make friends. People had ridiculed and judged him for being different. He had constantly endured vision problems, eyestrain, and was easily fatigued. Jay's dad had sworn that he would protect his son from any challenges, but he had walked out the door and never returned. Jay hadn't seen him since that dreadful day.

Jay walked into the kitchen and got a small bowl of water from the faucet. As it poured, it splashed against the walls of the bright orange bowl. Jay quickly grabbed a leftover KFC chicken wing that had been left to rot in the fridge, its stench still strong, sweet but peppery. Jay, hands overflowing, stumbled back to the front door and opened it. The dog patiently sat down on their welcome mat waiting for food. Jay placed the bowl of water down in front of the small dog and threw the chicken wing beside it, hitting the mat and leaving a small grease stain. The dog, completely famished, looked no older than two or three years old. It had one eye and a shining white coat painted with a layer of gunk and dirt.

When the dog had licked every drop of water out of the bowl, and had torn every last piece of meat off the chicken wing, he laid himself down next to Jay. His snout sniffed the cold autumn air while the autumn leaves whipped around in the wind, and the naked trees tapped on the windows of the tall brick houses. The air smelled like wet leaves, with the addition of a cinnamon and pumpkin pie aroma that wafted over from his neighbor's house to tantalize him. The roots of the trees had caused rifts in the overgrown and dirty sidewalks, and the flower bunches hunched over in the cold, wilting. The crows squawked at the passing clouds as people hustled up and down the streets. The cold tickled the tip of Jay's nose and dried out his throat. Jay grabbed his gray tweed scarf and pulled it over his mouth. He began to stroke the dog behind its ear when he was interrupted.

"Jay!" Jay's mom scolded, swatting away the dog with a newspaper, "What are you doing with that rat of a dog?!" Jay ambled back inside while his mom shut the door behind him. "What am I to do if you get rabies and die?!" Jay's mom bellowed, warning him against interacting with the dog.

She shook her head and headed back to her bedroom talking. "Plus, what has that dog done for us?" she asked. Jay's mom sat down at her vanity table and pulled out a pair of fake gold hoop earrings from her jewelry box while Jay sat in the living room on the couch with a sketchbook and a pencil in hand. "I'm going out tonight with a couple of my friends around the block, so you will be home alone," Jay's mom informed him while applying a mahogany colored lipstick to her lips. She looked back at Jay as he nodded, letting his mom know that he was listening, his hand scribbling away, leaving thick dark marks in his leather-backed sketchbook. "Make sure you lock the door, and do not under any circumstances let anyone in the house, understood?" Jay's mom stated boldly, repeating her rules for the hundredth time. Jay gave a preoccupied nod, and his mom looked him up and down, checking that he knew what he was doing. "You certainly like that sketchbook more than me," Jay's mom said in a ridiculing manner, sliding on a pair of dark red heels that went with her lipstick, and grabbing a black purse that matched her sheath dress.

Jay set down his book and pencil, sighed heavily, and slowly ambled over to his mom, his arms out wide, bracing for a hug. She grabbed a hold of him and slightly swayed him side to side.

"Mhmm," he mumbled as she caressed his hair.

“Y’know, it seems like it was just yesterday that you were a baby, and look at you now! You’re nearly eight years old!” She placed her hands on either side of his face. “My big baby boy, I’m gonna miss you while I’m gone!”

Jay pulled away from his mom while she opened the door to their house. She grabbed her car keys and unlocked the car with a beep. She rolled down her window and stuck her head out of the car, “TEXT ME IF YOU NEED ANYTHING!” she yelled across the parking lot. Jay closed the door, embarrassed by his mother while she slowly pulled out of the house complex parking lot and drove off to go meet up with her other friends.

Disregarding his mother’s strict rules, Jay didn’t bother to lock the front door because his mother was going to be back in a few hours anyway. He left his phone on the coffee table in the living room, and gathered his sketchbook and his pencil to bring to his room. Jay pulled headphones out of his bedside drawer and plopped down onto his air mattress. Music blasting, Jay mindlessly scribbled every image that came to his mind: insects, people, the dirty paint-covered mug that had been brewing in the corner of his room for weeks.

After a few minutes of drawing, Jay heard a faint barking sound over his loud music. He shrugged it off and continued to turn up the volume, drowning out the noise, with no concern for his eardrums. The barking continued to get louder, even though he continued to crank up the volume of his music. Jay paused his song and placed his headphones around his neck, curious to know what was causing the noise.

Jay heard whimpering and rustling coming from his kitchen. He snuck out of his room, heart racing, hoping it was his mom who had forgotten something, like maybe her phone. He peered around the corner of the wall to see what all the commotion was, and he saw a tall, muscular man ransacking his house. He had a knife in the back pocket of his jeans, and he wore a dirty undershirt. The brigand had flipped his house upside down; the cabinet doors were all flung open, the drawers were fully pulled out, and their contents were sprinkled about the floor. Jay glanced around his house, observing what the robber had done to it when his heart stopped. On the floor of the living room, the dog lay injured. Jay’s blood boiled as he thought to himself, What kind of monster would do that to a poor dog? Jay slowly backed away from the burglar, heading back to his room where he could lock himself in until his mom came home. Jay walked backwards, holding in his breath so the brigand wouldn’t hear his breathing. Jay stepped on a squeaky plank in the hardwood floor, and it let out a loud CREAK!

"Hey, who's there?" a gruff and scratchy voice boomed angrily. "I SAID, WHO'S THERE?" Jay whimpered, accepting his fate as the burglar turned the corner and made eye contact with him.

"What were you trying to do, kid," the man asked, looming menacingly over Jay. "I SAID, what were you trying to do kid?"

Jay whimpered and slowly slouched down the wall onto the floor. His eyes shut, and tears trickled down his cheeks in fear.

"Don't make me pull out this knife on ya!" the man threatened, his hand clasped around the handle of the knife in his back pocket.

Jay looked around to see if anyone was coming to save him; the police, his mom, or even his dad? No one was there to rescue him, just Jay, the robber, and the injured dog that lay motionless on the floor of his living room.

"Where ya looking, ya little maggot?" the man questioned looking behind him. "No one's coming to help." The robber glared at Jay with a hysterical and deranged look in his eyes. "Not even that pathetic excuse for a dog could protect y-AHUGGH!" The criminal let out a blood-curdling scream that most likely woke up half the neighborhood. The dog had sunk his teeth deep into the robber's calf, causing him to collapse to the ground, grimacing in pain.

Jay immediately got up from the ground and dashed to the coffee table to grab his phone. He scooped up the dog in one arm, carried him into his room, locked the door, and immediately called 911. Within a few minutes of receiving the call, the police swarmed the house, and found the criminal hobbling out of the room, trying to escape. The criminal slouched in defeat, hand clutching the bite wound on his leg, drenched in blood. He proceeded to be escorted into an ambulance for medical attention while Jay was interrogated by the police chief. Jay's mom pulled into the parking lot in a scramble, frantically searching for her son to see if he was okay. She dashed over to him and scooped

d him up in her arms crying, eyes overflowing with tears, interrupting a police officer's questioning.

"I'M SO SORRY!" she cried to her son, "I SWEAR I WILL NEVER LEAVE YOU AGAIN, DO YOU HEAR ME!"

"M-m-mom?" Jay mumbled under his breath. "T-t-t-the dog s-saved me."

"D-did you just say your first words?" Jay's mom stuttered, astonished. Overwhelmed by the intensity of the moment, eyes awash with tears she set her son back down on the floor.

"T-t-the dog... I w-w-want," he whispered, pointing to the dog sitting on the front porch, except this time the dog was accompanied by police. His beautiful, previously pristine white coat was now doused in blood and dirt.

"That filthy old dog?" Jay's mom pointed, smiling. "You can have him."

From that day on, the dog would sit on their porch and lay down on their welcome mat every morning with a bowl of water and his breakfast for the rest of his life.

Student Name: Derek Jiu  
Grade: 9  
School: St. John's School  
Title: Ghosted...  
Category: Poetry  
Key: Silver Key  
Educator:

I still remember the scent of your perfume: mint-kissed vanilla  
with a raspberry swirl. Just like your favorite ice cream flavor, at the  
parlor right by the cemetery. We always walked past while heading  
back; you'd suspend a breath, pray that no ghost stirred, foggy speech  
crystallizing into wisps of a sticky promise. I'd knead your cheeks like  
mochi dough, knocking the fresh ice cream into the air. We watched it  
tumble onto your hair and stretch down your face, leaving a cruel  
streak of milky moraine. Before I could even smile you pounced, variegated  
nails glistening, wrestling my arm, pouting the whole way home. That  
night, I groveled before your doorstep the way a fire serenades winter  
doldrums – fervent tendrils pounding through snow, promising a  
brighter tomorrow. You'd laugh, tell me to close my eyes and breathe. But  
come spring and the parlor melts down, reduced to a shapeless  
dream, catchlight embers seething to smoke. Beside us, the graveyard

yearns for fresh meat, jaded fangs bared towards a slit tomb. You  
etch out our names along its epitaph and vanish into the stars, a tulle of  
mint-kissed vanilla and raspberries billowing past the salted evening wind.

Student Name: Arjun Maitra

Grade: 12

School: St. John's School

Title: Gods and Kings: An Analysis of Napoleon's Rule in *The Passion*

Category: Critical Essay

Key: Silver Key

Educator: Kemberly Kemp

Napoleon Bonaparte. Corsican. 5'6. First Consul and Emperor. How did this short Frenchman manage to change Europe forever? Napoleon's path to power was marked by remarkable achievements, from his military campaigns to becoming the Emperor of the French. His rise was fueled by the chaos of the French Revolution and the subsequent political instability in France. As he seized control and instituted reforms, Napoleon's charisma and ambition propelled him to unparalleled heights; his rapid ascent to power also sowed the seeds of his god complex. As he consolidated authority, he began to see himself as a larger-than-life figure, believing that he possessed the vision and strength to reshape Europe and lead it into a new era. This self-perception, along with his ability to inspire loyalty among his followers, contributed to the development of his god-like aspirations.

*The Passion* brings us to a world where history and desire create a tale, leading us to explore the depths of human ambition and longing. Winterson explores Napoleon's God-like aspirations and the magnetic charisma that drew people under his spell. The narrative follows Henri, a young and impressionable soldier who loves Napoleon's charismatic leadership and the fervent devotion it inspires. Yet, when Napoleon begins to lose, Henri begins to lose faith in Napoleon and his God Complex. Through this change in dynamic, Jeanette Winterson illustrates both the allure as well as the fragility of political power.

Henri's unwavering devotion to Napoleon provides a striking reflection of the broader public sentiment during the height of Napoleon's power. Henri's observations and experiences mirror the national psyche. He, like many of his contemporaries, is completely enraptured by the aura Napoleon projects. The magnetism of Napoleon's personality and his grand visions for France resonate deeply with Henri, who sees Napoleon as not just a leader but a symbol of hope and national pride. The fact that he "was in love with himself and France joined in" encapsulates this sentiment perfectly (12). Here, Napoleon's self-love is not just narcissism; it's a force that draws an entire nation into its orbit. The citizens, represented by Henri, become willing participants in this collective adoration. Winterson uses Henri's experiences, from witnessing Napoleon's speeches to the bustling camp life, to highlight the spellbinding effect Napoleon had on the masses. Henri's journey alongside Napoleon takes him from the thrilling early days of victories and conquests to the more sobering moments of retreat and doubt. Through

Henri's eyes, Winterson offers readers a glimpse into the emotional rollercoaster experienced by those who placed their faith in Napoleon. Whether it's the palpable excitement in the camp before a major battle or the introspective moments by the campfire, Henri's experiences underscore the profound impact of Napoleon's god-like image on the individual and collective psyche of France.

Napoleon's unique brand of populism can be broken down through a Jungian lens. Henri's unwavering devotion to Napoleon can be seen as a manifestation of the collective unconscious of the French nation during the height of Napoleon's power. In examining modern political contexts, parallels can be drawn with leaders like Marine Le Pen and Donald Trump. Le Pen, amidst high unemployment and a loss of trust in the political system, tapped into historical experiences of Muslim invasions, activating collective unconscious sentiments against Muslim immigrants. Similarly, Trump's anti-immigrant stance and promises to restore the country to an earlier era resonated with a segment of the American population. As John Dreijmanis of the University Bremen writes, both leaders strategically activated the collective unconscious of their respective nations, reflecting the power of Jungian archetypes in contemporary populist politics.

Tapping into this collective unconscious may prove to be successful for gaining votes, but it also sets a dangerous precedent. In *The Passion*, this is evidenced by the tragic episode of 2000 soldiers drowning in a flood while attempting to cross the river. Despite Napoleon's claims to his officers that "no storm could defeat [them]," they blindly follow his orders as they are so invested in his vision (24). It underscores how the collective unconscious, when harnessed by a leader like Napoleon, can lead to both glory and tragedy, with profound implications for the fate of a nation.

A similar effect occurs in the modern world. Research by the University of York shows that the world is trending toward fewer and less lethal wars over time. Humans as a race have gotten far more peaceful and tolerant for each other. Evoking the collective unconscious essentially turns back the clock and brings back the more rabid and belligerent nature of early humans. The corruption of the American collective unconscious manifested with the January 6th insurrection, where over 10k American citizens attacked the home of democracy. A decade ago, when our collective unconscious was left relatively alone, a Jan. 6th-type event seemed unimaginable. But once Trump brought his supporters too far back into the collective unconscious, they blindly followed his orders, much like the officers with Napoleon.

Henri's faith seems to crumble due to the harrowing realities and brutal experiences he faced in battle. His initial perception of fighting for glory morphs into a grim realization where "death in battle seemed only what it was. Death" (108). This transition reveals the shattering of his idolized view of war and the leaders he followed, contributing to the erosion of his "God Complex." The brutal scenes he witnessed during the Zero Winter strip away any glorified illusions and leave only the stark truth of death and suffering. Henri's questioning and crumbling faith in the cause and the leadership signifies the

fragility of attributing god-like statuses even to someone he viewed as his "passion." Henri eventually concludes that the fighting "can't be in our blood" (108). Henri's disillusionment during the Zero Winter symbolizes a Jungian confrontation with the shadows, where the previously heroic archetypes of leadership, embodied by Napoleon, begin to disintegrate under the brutal realities of conflict. This process exposes the fragility of the "God Complex," illustrating how the collision of the illusion of glory with harsh truths leads to a clearer reality of the state of the leadership.

In *The Passion*, Jeanette Winterson illustrates through the lens of history how leaders with big egos and unchecked power, like Napoleon, can fall from grace. A Jungian analysis shows the dangers of falling for the charm of powerful leaders who connect with deep, common feelings in people, bringing out ancient ideas of heroes and enemies. Both followers and leaders are at risk when a leader taps into the collective unconscious. Followers might be led astray by the leader's charm, while the leader might be blinded by their own power and lose sight of reality. Today, in the real world, we see similar situations with leaders like Donald Trump and Boris Johnson. Both rode the coattails of the collective unconscious of their respective nations to victory in elections. But both of their political careers and support (arguably for Trump) have fallen apart as they fell into political scandal. When Johnson painted himself as a man for the British people, yet broke his own COVID regulations to host a party, it reflected a disconnect between the archetype of a protective leader he projected and his actual behavior. Similar to Napoleon, he was quickly ousted, and his support base was left in shambles.

The cases of both Napoleon and modern day leaders show us the need for careful thought and critical awareness when dealing with powerful and charming leaders. They encourage us to not just get swept away by a leader's charm or big promises. Instead, we should question, think critically, and make wise choices to protect our societies from potential chaos caused by reckless leadership.

Student Name: Elisa Feygin  
Grade: 8  
School: St. John's School  
Title: Guilt Personified  
Category: Poetry  
Key: Silver Key  
Educator: Michael Seckman

### Guilt Personified

I am your chains,  
Your unyielding tethers.  
Destroying your hope  
When you try to feel better.

I am a snake,  
My bite poisons dreams.  
Your joy turned to dust,  
Your laughs turned to screams.

Once I have caught you,  
My line pulls you in.  
Your dreams of escape  
Crushed by those of your sins.

I wear you down slowly,  
Day after day.  
For when guilt pulls you under,  
You will not get away.

Student Name: Felipe Casal

Grade: 9

School: St. John's School

Title: How does Olivia feel to be rejected by Viola (As Cesario) on her second visit?

"Twelfth Night" Soliloquy

Category: Poetry

Key: Silver Key

Educator: Kemberly Kemp

Why sweet Cesario, my leman, must love have such a confused state...

My heart, once beating with hope, now aches in rejection.

I invited you into my world, for a second time, and still, you're yet to spark the flame that lingers inside of me.

Alas, your words cut through my heart.

Ay me detested...

How could this happen? What have I done wrong?

Oh, how I long for the warmth of passion amidst the chillness of my unsought affection:

The aftermath of my unspoken words fill up the air.

Did I misinterpret the signs, or was our connection merely an illusion?

A wise man's son, was I, trapped under an impossible fantasy?

The grandeur of my estate seems to mock the smallness of my wounded heart.

Although, it used-to be a rich color of gold that shone in these hallways, they are nothing but a dull shadow when compared to the denay that darkens my soul.

I thought that my Cesario would solve my solitude; alas, he gave birth to my sadness.

Is my affection scurvy?

I am haunted by the vivid memory of Cesario's retreating figure.

The boldness of my confession, met with a stern refusal, rings in my ears like a persistent echo. My love, which was built up on the same rock as the cliffs embracing Illyrian's shores; has come crumbling down before me.

Like a ship tossed on a stormy sea, I am adrift in the wake of my emotions, grappling with the wreckage of my expectations.

Oh, how my broken but unbeaten heart shall heal at the gentle touch of time's healing hand.

Student Name: Lee Monistere

Grade: 10

School: St. John's School

Title: How Secrets Destroy Relationships in Kazuo Ishiguro's *Klara and the Sun*

Category: Critical Essay

Key: Silver Key

Educator: rachel weissenstein

A common saying in Alcoholics Anonymous states “you are only as sick as your secrets” (FSR Editor, “You’re Only As Sick As Your Secrets: Why You Need To Get Honest”). People who struggle with addiction refrain from talking about their problems in fear of judgment and shame (“You’re Only As Sick As Your Secrets”). Addicts do not want to be a burden to others, and they feel embarrassed voicing their problems (“You’re Only As Sick As Your Secrets”). Their dishonesty and isolation cause them to dismantle their support systems and the relationships around them. However, this is an issue in all relationships. When people keep secrets, their connections fall apart. In Kazuo Ishiguro’s novel *Klara and the Sun*, the characters struggle with being honest and open with one another. Throughout the story, they lie and deceive each other. Although some of the secrets are intentionally calculated and deceptive, the characters construct a majority of them to protect each other. However, secrets in the novel are always destructive to the characters’ relationships and result in distrust when they feel kept in the dark, even if it is done in their best interest. In *Klara and the Sun*, Ishiguro illustrates that people have dysfunctional relationships because of the secrets they keep from one another.

Secrets in relationships make authentic communication impossible. For instance, Chrissie’s dishonesty impairs her relationship with Josie. After the meeting with Mr. Capaldi in the city, Chrissie decides that she and Paul “can’t keep everything hidden from [Josie]” anymore because “she suspects so many things” (Ishiguro 236). Chrissie realizes the consequences of her dishonesty with Josie. Although Josie is unaware of how grave the information is, she knows that her mom is keeping secrets from her, and as a result, Chrissie feels guilty. Because of Chrissie’s dishonesty and shame, there is something off about Josie and her mom’s interactions, as if they are constantly walking on eggshells around each other. However, Chrissie could have avoided their awkward conversations if she had revealed the plans for the portrait to Josie before her appointments with Mr. Capaldi began. In the same way that Chrissie’s untruthfulness damages her communication with Josie, Chrissie’s secrets lead to inauthentic communication with Melania Housekeeper. Melania’s suspicions about the portrait lead her to ask Klara to keep a “damn good eye on Miss Josie in [the] city” because Chrissie does not let Melania go (174). When Melania asks to accompany Josie, Chrissie says no because she knows “[Melania is] onto something” (174). Chrissie and Melania’s communication is already

compromised because of their different class levels, and Chrissie disregards Melania because she has a lower social status. However, Melania cares about Josie, and she recognizes there is something odd about how Chrissie refuses to disclose any of the details about the portrait. Instead of forcing the information out of Chrissie, Melania goes as far as to recruit Klara, who she has never held a conversation with until now. Chrissie and Melania's mutual distrust prevents them from communicating authentically. As Chrissie's secrets damage the connection between her and Melania, they also worsen the family dynamic between Paul, Chrissie, and Josie. Specifically, when Chrissie finally decides to explain what the portrait is to Josie, Chrissie decides that Paul should "drive off somewhere" because she wants Paul "far away while she talks to Josie" (212). Chrissie does not trust Paul to respond maturely to Josie's reaction to the portrait. The parents' broken relationship already impairs their communication, but the secrets they keep from one another and Josie worsen it. Their dishonesty weakens the family dynamic between the three of them. Paul dislikes how Chrissie keeps her plans close to her chest, Chrissie hates how Paul reacts to her opinions, and Josie is caught in the middle of her parents' arguments. The family members' mutual distrust creates an unhealthy environment where the characters are unable to express their emotions.

Likewise, secrets create dysfunctional relationships because they represent misguided attempts to protect another person's feelings. Specifically, Josie wants to protect her mom from disappointment by hiding her sickness on the day they plan to go to Morgan's Falls. Josie knows Chrissie looks "forward to a day like this" because instead of working, she gets to spend "one free day with [her] daughter" (94). However, Chrissie knows that Josie is not well, and she gets upset with Josie for saying "she's fine when she's really feeling sick" (94). Chrissie wants Josie to be honest with her about her health, even if the truth comes at the cost of their plans. Josie's dishonesty creates distrust between her and Chrissie, which impairs their relationship. While Josie lies about feeling ill to protect her mom from disappointment, Paul tries to protect Josie by not telling her about the portrait. After Paul finds out about the true plan, he storms out of the building and takes Josie with him. When Josie tries to interrogate Paul, he appreciates it when Chrissie interrupts their conversation because "Josie was in the middle of asking some tough questions," and he had "no idea at all how to answer" (213). Paul has "always been useless at lying to [Josie]," so he is relieved when he does not have to break the news to her. However, Paul's secretiveness only worsens the impact on Josie when she is finally let in on the true incentives of the portrait. Even though Paul intends to protect her feelings, Josie closes herself off when she realizes that her whole family has been lying to her and secretly preparing for her death. Simultaneously, as Paul struggles with keeping Josie in the dark, Helen grapples with being open with Rick about her relationship with Mr. Vance. At the diner when Helen tries to convince Vance that Rick belongs at Atlas Brookings, the conversation takes a turn for the worse when Vance realizes that Helen is asking him to pull strings for her and Rick, despite the fact that for "twenty-seven years [she refused] to have any communication with [him]" (247). Vance blows up at her in front of Rick because

he thinks Helen should not “hide things” from her son, and Rick should “see what this is about” (247). Vance persists in exposing Helen’s immoral, past decisions, and he continues to embarrass her in front of Rick. Helen does not tell Rick any details about her and Vance’s relationship because she knows that Rick would refuse to meet with Vance if he knew how things ended between them, and she wants to protect Rick from embarrassment. However, this ultimately backfires when Rick hears Vance list all of the horrible things Helen had done. Even though she intends to protect Rick from shame, Helen’s dishonesty leaves Rick feeling confused and kept in the dark, and she could have avoided the whole argument by telling Rick the truth about her past.

All in all, secrets consume and dismantle relationships. Even if some secrets are meant to protect another person’s feelings, truthfulness is always the key to healthy communication in relationships. In *Klara and the Sun*, secrets impair family, friendly, and professional connections. These secrets can be either intentionally withheld or something that is solely unspoken. Either way, they always cause connections to fall apart. Nevertheless, authentic communication and honesty do not guarantee a healthy relationship. There are many components that are necessary to ensure people feel safe and secure with each other, such as mutual respect, unselfishness, and love. That is to say, relationships are complex, and there are no qualities that are able to entirely prevent dysfunctional connections.

Student Name: Jennifer Liu

Grade: 11

School: St. John's School

Title: Impact of women justices in United States supreme courts

Category: Critical Essay

Key: Silver Key

Educator:

When raising the topic of women in the Supreme Court, two figures that are keystone to its early development are Sandra Day O'Connor and Ruth Bader Ginsberg. As forerunners in their field, they were both powerful women who believed more female judiciaries in the criminal justice system would signify progress. When Ruth Bader Ginsberg was asked the question "When will there be enough women on the Supreme Court," she replied, "When there are nine; [for] there had been nine men and nobody's ever raised a question about that." Her statement aligns with the fundamental principles of justice in numerous ways. Abridging Cornell Law School's definition, justice is the ethical, philosophical idea that people are to be treated fairly by the law, that laws are to ensure that no harm befalls another, and where harm is alleged, a morally right remedial action is taken. In short, justice is considered to be equal treatment and fairness for all in a legal system.

Therefore, supreme courts should reflect the equality and fairness they claim by implementing an equal number of female and male judges. With the times progressing, women judges in state supreme courts have risen from the original fourteen in 1980 to one hundred thirty-six in the past few years (Songer and Crews-Mayer, 2000). Beyond improving public perception of the justice system, female judges also bring their lived experiences as women to the courts and can identify with victims of sexual assault more than male judges (Ruiz, 2019). Yet, in racially diverse countries such as the United States, fair representation often far exceeds gender, and women judges currently serving in supreme courts often have extremely similar backgrounds and socialization as their male counterparts due to the same race, class, and education. I argue that improvement in the criminal justice system cannot be merely limited to more women judiciaries serving as it is an issue of equality and fairness in representation across all races, economic statuses, and political affiliations.

To ensure precision and accuracy when citing previous research, I will limit my argument to state supreme courts and federal appellate courts as there is a wider pool of statistics and data available than the United States Supreme Court (SCOTUS), and will therefore make conclusions more effective.

Without equal input from an integral part of our population, supreme courts fail to uphold their own promise of equality and fairness. First, reports show that while there are around 50% of female students in law school, only around 35% enter the legal profession worldwide (Castillejo-Aragón, 2021). An increase in female high level judiciaries would thus enhance public confidence in the justice system through their inclusion in the historically male-dominated space. Additionally, the support and trust of the people is essential to the rule of law, and the judiciary and its decisions would not be credited if it is viewed as elite and discriminatory. With President Donald Trump's nominees to the federal benches being the least diverse since Herbert Hoover, there needs to be a remedy for this action to reflect the growing diversity in America (Robbins, 2019). Not only do more women in the judiciary system improve it on a surface level, they are credited with providing a gender perspective on adjudication, which includes pointing out laws that could be based on gender stereotypes, as well as empathizing with more victims of sexual assault and sex discrimination. According to one study, in sexual assault cases where the panel made a pro-plaintiff decision, the plaintiff was 86% more likely to win when a female judge was on the bench (Peresie, 2005). –Having a female judge on the panel influenced the male judges to vote more in favor of the plaintiff regardless of ideology, illuminating how personal identity affects beliefs and standpoints for judges.

Though the study above controlled race, political ideology, and a variety of other factors, the intersectionality of these traits along with gender in the real world leads to more complicated results. For example, research shows that female Bill Clinton appointees to federal district courts were actually less likely to support plaintiffs in sex discrimination cases than their male counterparts (Peresie, 2005). Furthermore, while some sources found that female judges in the past generally made more liberal decisions than male judges, other studies show the opposite. One explanation offered by Donald Songer and Kelly Crews-Meyer hypothesized that the reason female judges are perceived to be more liberal is that they were usually selected to supreme courts through different paths from their male counterparts. Women tended to be involved in liberal or women's groups and PTAs beforehand, or were selected in more liberal states. This explanation also suggests why women are viewed as having a more humanitarian and empathetic perspective, even though empathy is not a gendered trait. Yet, after comparing the rulings of the death penalty and obscenity as non-gender specific controls in 52 state supreme courts, it was found that although the presence of female judges influenced their male peers to vote more liberally, it did not influence their female colleagues at all. Although women in the Democratic party tended to vote more liberally than their male counterparts, gender did not play a significant role in decision-making in the Republican party. Through these results, it can be seen that similar political backgrounds between judges impacted their decisions more than inherent gender differences in approaching a case.

Related education levels and economic statuses among a vast majority of judges on U.S. supreme courts led to comparable decision-making processes. I believe that there are more similarities between male and female judiciaries due to analogous training and backgrounds. According to Steffensmeier and Hebert's, "Women and Men Policymakers: Does the Judge's Gender Affect the Sentencing of Criminal Defendants?" from earlier decades until now, most judges are middle to upper-class, white, went to law schools in the state they served in, and worked as public defenders or prosecutors before serving (1999). Therefore, they are unable or unwilling to accommodate the blind spots created by the gap in diversity, as perpetuating the status quo is part of the privileges they possess. It was thus revealed that while female judges and male judges give the same sentences for white women, female judges actually give harsher sentences to other racial subgroups (Steffensmeier and Hebert, 1999). Since white female judges give similar sentences as their white male counterparts, they are also guilty of racial biases due to a lack of diversity and inclusion in courts.

With substantial proof that the factors influencing adjudication span further than gender alone, it is of utmost importance to provide more descriptive representation for all populations in the United States. In 20 states, no justice identifies as a person of color in the supreme courts; there are no Black justices in 28 states, no Latino justices in 39 states, no Asian American justices in 43 states, and no Native American justices in 47 states (Bannon and Powers, 2022). Although the percentages of the general population to justices in high courts still severely underrepresent men and women of color, judges of color who have served have brought great changes to the criminal justice system. For example, analysis shows that white judges are much less likely than Black judges to find for the plaintiff in racial discrimination cases, especially if the plaintiff is African American (Chew and Kelley, 2009). Another study demonstrates the significance of the intersectionality of race and gender in judges: while judges convicted at the same rate for rape cases, female judges imposed longer sentences than male judges primarily because Black female judges gave harsher sentences than Black male judges (Spohn, 1990).

Recently, new achievements have been made to further diversity in state supreme courts. In 2022, "40 percent (10 out of 25) of new justices are people of color, an increase from [2021] when 27 percent (11 out of 41) of new justices were people of color" (Bannon and Powers, 2022). States such as Missouri, California, and Maryland also saw their first Hispanic or Black women justices in courts. Approximately a quarter of federal judges appointed by Biden are Black women, however, statistics reflect that only 70 out of 3,843 people (which is under 2%) who have ever served as federal judges in the United States have been Black women (Gramlich, 2022). With this perspective, it becomes clear that even with small improvements in diversity, there are still extensive measures needed to balance the long-withstanding history of injustice in America.

In conclusion, viewing gender as the central way to compensate for the lack of diversity in U.S. supreme courts proved to be ineffectual, as women judiciaries gave the same sentences as men in the field given similar backgrounds. I would like to add that while this essay largely treated gender as a binary for the sake of the argument, it would be unfair to approach the issue as such in practice. Furthermore, it is unreasonable to expect women judges to counteract the sexism shown by male judges; instead, we need to educate all judges to practice empathy and equality when judging and challenge their own biases. Especially since law schools and institutions still follow the status quo dominated by older, white male judges, a more thorough solution would be reforming education and electoral systems in addition to adding more judges of color. Finally, while female judges seemed to improve case outcomes for cases involving sexual discrimination, sexual assault, or rape, victims often face countless obstacles in reporting the crime even before the trial starts: such as a lack of evidence, credibility obstacles, and the survivor's identity. With deep-rooted discriminatory issues within the United States, hiring judges with varied status in race, economic class, and past work experiences for the Supreme Court would better serve justice.

Student Name: Vivian Kwoh

Grade: 11

School: St. John's School

Title: Just Like Her

Category: Poetry

Key: Silver Key

Educator:

I am just like her

The extra in another story

Who can't shoot a bow

Or wield a sword

Or cast spells

I cannot speak to dragons

I cannot stop regimes

My parents are fabulous

And as ordinary as their secrets

And definitely alive

I have no powers

I have no wings

I have no undying resilience

I hate my body

but not enough to change it

And not enough to wallow in it

I'm not hiding beauty

I don't have witty comebacks

And I definitely don't stutter

I am told I can't do it

I try and fail

I am extra ordinary

I am the one who came before

The poor first draft

Before the real chosen one

Who comes

And shoots the bow

Wields the sword

Casts spells

Speaks to dragons and stops regimes

Who has powers and wings and

“Undying resilience”

Who has confidence and beauty and wit

Whose parents are gone

Who is told they can't

And says watch me

The one who is extraordinary

But at least I got to be a draft

At least I got to be

Student Name: Suraj Verma

Grade: 9

School: St. John's School

Title: Legacy Preferences -The Future of Higher Education?

Category: Critical Essay

Key: Silver Key

Educator: Brian Beard

### Legacy Preferences -The Future of Higher Education?

Throughout history, people have relied on education to better understand the world around them, secure the highest-earning jobs, and further themselves in life. For centuries, individuals seeking a collegiate experience ventured to America, the fabled "Land of Opportunity," with hopes that higher education would grant them the best life possible. However, colleges have recently placed more weight on special privileges in their already competitive admissions process, including legacy preferences, which benefit children of alumni. The issue has polarized private and public colleges across the nation, and the debate over whether to abolish the practice has consumed higher education. Legacy preferences have corrupted college admissions and should be severely altered, for they provide no advantages to legacies and non-legacies alike, violate the Civil Rights Acts, and destroy the fundamental principle of higher education.

The standard college admissions process began more than two hundred and fifty years after the establishment of the first American college, Harvard, in 1636 ("College Education Timeline"). In the years leading up to 1900, the elite institutions of the nation began to receive more applications than there were spots available. In response, colleges adopted more rigorous application requirements, including the Scholastic Aptitude Test (SAT), in the first quarter of the twentieth century ("College Admissions Timeline"). At this time, European immigrants, especially Jews, outperformed the wealthy in the budding college admissions process. To keep those immigrants from taking away spots from their funders, elite institutions limited the number of Jews they would admit. When the practice came under public criticism, schools implemented more indirect ways of limiting admission rates, such as legacy preferences (Kahlenberg). The term "legacy" refers to the children of alumni or individuals who have family as graduates from a specific school. In addition, admission offices consider legacy status a factor of "demonstrated interest," which measures the "degree to which applicants connect with the institution and express their likelihood to accept an offer of admission" (Bastedo). Today, around three-fourths of the top hundred institutions in the nation (ranked by U.S. News and Report) employ legacy preferences ("Colorado is Banning"). However, recent revelations such as the "Varsity Blues" scandal at Harvard have caused the practice to come under the scrutiny of the

public eye (Belkin). Many believe that the time has come for the status, in addition to other factors of demonstrated interest, to end.

Although colleges promote socioeconomic diversity in admissions, legacy preferences ostensibly favor wealthy individuals who already possess advantages over other applicants. Most legacies to America's top schools always had access to the resources needed for them to succeed:

What is the justification for favoring the offspring of Harvard, Yale, and Princeton alumni? Unlike many inner-city kids, they grow up in families with a strong pro-education ethos. They have access to the finest public or private high schools in the country. Their parents can spring for tutors, standardized test preparation, and even consultants to help them write essays and complete their college applications. (Dalmia)

Adding even more preferential treatment makes legacies almost impossible to compete with, especially regarding low-income families. In an article, the Editorial Board of The New York Times asserted that while most Americans disapprove of the current legacy system, the preferences remain "supported by the affluent who both oversee the college admissions process and are its primary beneficiaries" ("End the College"). Because many wealthy families have jurisdiction in the decisions colleges make, they possess every opportunity they need to boost their children's admissions chances at their alma mater schools. However, they continue to push for legacy preferences, even when all it achieves is lowering other, less fortunate students' odds of admission. However, despite this, the preferences do not even benefit the namesake "legacy" applicants it seemingly does on the surface.

Even though colleges claim that legacy preferences remain sound, they directly violate the Civil Rights Acts, several of the most prominent and important legislations in American history. President John F. Kennedy first envisioned the Civil Rights Act of 1964 after pledging to abolish all traces of prejudice in the common workplace, and the final document included statements prohibiting discrimination based on ancestry (Blair). Extending to all formal institutions, the law's restrictions also affect colleges, regardless of the private or public status. Because legacy preferences favor certain bloodlines, not all applicants are treated equally, which openly defies the act. The influential *Runyon v. McCrary* Supreme Court case regarding the 1866 Civil Rights Act noted that the document "prohibits racial discrimination in the making and enforcement of private contracts" (Brown). Colleges first used legacy preferences a century ago to cap the number of applicants they admitted per race, but unlike other demonstrated interest policies, their purpose has not changed with time and the arrival of new laws. The status directly infringes the law, as through the practice, admissions offices view their applicants as just another way to maintain their racial quotas. Ultimately, legacy preferences have long lost

their credibility, disregarding the chief legislations that work towards establishing a more equal society.

While colleges advocate for students with excellent academic and extracurricular records, legacy status stymies the fundamental principle that one can reach success through merit rather than predetermined qualities at birth. On the Scholastic Aptitude Tests, legacy status constitutes a 160-point boost (Dalmia). Amplifying one's score simply because of their bloodline disregards the effort that meritorious students put in to obtain a high score. Furthermore, if an applicant achieves a near-perfect score on the SAT, admissions offices will consider them on par with their legacy peers who performed worse, even if the non-legacy student displayed more academic achievement. Not only does the status enhance exam scores, but the practice can also unjustly increase a student's overall admission chance compared to their non-legacy peers at the US' most prestigious colleges:

In 2011, a Harvard researcher who studied 30 of the nation's most selective schools found that all legacy applicants had a 23 percent higher probability of admission, while "primary legacy" students (those with a parent who attended the school as an undergraduate, rather than, say, a grandparent or aunt) had a 45 percent higher probability compared with their peers, all other things being equal. ("End the College")

Even if a student strives for excellence, the preferences will continue to shut them down, prioritizing legacies not because of stellar grades or excellent resumes but solely because of their auspicious ancestry. Colleges relinquish all that they stand for when employing legacy preferences, solidifying that family lineages are now more important to them than the students themselves.

Some admissions experts argue that colleges should maintain legacy preferences because donations from alumni, or "alumni giving," constitutes a substantial portion of their funding. They assert that providing a spot to legacy applicants at the same school will make that family "feel a sense of loyalty and generosity (read: will write more checks.) And what institution does not want a quick and easy boost to fundraising efforts?" (Springen). Without those critical donations, they claim that colleges would not have access to the resources, facilities, and faculty they need to stay competitive in the higher education industry. However, no substantial evidence proves that colleges gain more money from alumni than non-alumni. In *The Price of Admission*, the Wall Street Journal's Daniel Golden highlighted that the California Institute of Technology received "a 600 million pledge—the largest gift in the history of higher education at the time—from Gordon Moore, confounder of Intel, neither of whose two sons attends the university. Caltech's commitment to high standards and excellence is a core part of its sales pitch to raise money from alumni and non-alumni alike" (Dalmia). Although he possessed no familial connections to the school, Moore saw the merit of Caltech's education as enough to bestow an unparalleled donation. Regardless of a school's stance on legacy status, families look more towards the overall quality of an institution rather than other external

factors when considering endowments. The myth that legacy preferences significantly bolster college funding only perpetuates a false façade of the practice, attempting to cloak the status' flaws and violations from public scrutiny.

For sullyng the college admissions process, legacy preferences have eradicated the merit of the higher education system. The practice pins down low-income students that could only dream of having the same opportunities most alumni families have simultaneously while cancelling the merit of hard-working legacy applicants out of fear. Furthermore, the policy directly neglects the country's paramount Civil Rights Acts and ignores the hard work of worthy, laudable, applicants. If systems of preferential treatment consume higher education, the American dream will finally die.

Student Name: Kirsten Nguyen

Grade: 8

School: St. John's School

Title: Looking Over the Edge

Category: Short Story

Key: Silver Key

Educator: Judy Adams

It was a very, very, very long way down.

Evening had just begun to fall upon the skyline of Blue Lake City. Sputters of passing cars whisked through the ears of a certain Alexander Quince, who teetered haphazardly on the side of the bridge, looking over the edge. Water, black like ink and swirling ominously, flowed beneath the towering structure. The sharp bite of a silver engagement ring in his hand kept him anchored to the ground, preventing his soul from floating away. He sucked in a breath, feeling the rush of air fill his chest, and let it out in a quick release. As he closed his eyes, whirling thoughts flooded his head—he imagined next morning's headline, of how the city's most successful businessman had taken his own life jumping off the City Bridge; it would surely shock his mother, maybe his sister, and...that was it. He had no friends, and no one else knew him. The only other person who would have understood him was dead and buried.

Hopeless and alone, he did not move to wipe away the stubborn tears that pricked his eyes. He could not force them away, for they refused to be controlled; these unruly beings never obeyed his orders to hide themselves from the sight of others.

The wind flew around him, whispering in his ears, hundreds of frail voices calling out for him to do it. To jump. To end everything.

This is what you want, Alexander.

He closed his eyes and precariously took a step forward, when...

"Wait."

The ghostly voice of someone he knew dragged him out of his daze. Nearly tumbling into the abysmal river, he flapped his arms like a frightened bird, righted himself, and turned to see a pale white figure, surrounded by a shining glow, standing just a few feet away. They wore the face of a familiar person...who was it? It couldn't be...

"Who are you?" Alexander demanded, his voice shaking. The figure stepped towards him, but he backed away, almost losing his footing again. "Tell me. Tell me now!"

"Calm yourself, Alexander," murmured a voice, fragile and calm. "It is only me."

"I don't know you," he said, panicked by the voice.

"You may not know me, but I know you. Do you remember? The days we spent together in the green maze of Central Park? The nights we roamed the New York City streets, looking for new restaurants to try? Our New Year's kiss? How you said you wished it would last forever? Before you left for this city and never returned? You left, Alexander. You left me. That day, at the airport, I watched you get on that plane and fly away. You didn't even say goodbye. I never saw you again, not even in my last days of living, because you were too busy to come back." Her emotions remained distant, almost sullen, ripping Alexander apart on the inside.

He tore his eyes away from the figure and shut them tightly. "You're not real. You're here to torture me. Whom have I angered? Why must they punish me so?" The figure extended a hand and tilted his chin upwards, and Alexander saw her face. Her soft eyes were just as perfect, just as beautiful as he remembered them.

"Darling, it's me. Do not tell me that I traveled all this way only for you to forget?"

"Isla. This isn't possible. You can't...you shouldn't be here." Alexander gently pushed her away, not wanting to believe she truly stood before him. The glossy, blank eyes fell upon him like a hollow stone, solid yet empty. Her cold expression sent flashes of ice through his body, and she bore no trace of life. If he had dared step closer, he would have sensed no heartbeat, nor oxygen in her lungs. Her presence before him contradicted the laws of nature as he knew them. She had taken her last breath years ago, in a hospital bed hundreds of miles away. And now she had reappeared, only coming back for him when he threatened his own life? He gritted his teeth, knowing that he could never bring himself to hate her, but how could she have left him?

"I knew you would react this way," Isla assured him, resting her frigid palm upon his shoulder. He flinched at her touch, cold sparks running through his veins. "I am here because I have finally come to terms with my absence from the living world." Her face softened, and a hint of life flickered behind her eyes, as though the Isla Alexander knew so well struggled to fight a force that prevented her from breaking free of her permanent death-like state. "And now you must accept my death as well. I am at peace, don't you see? Haven't you always wanted me to be happy?"

"I do want you to be happy," Alexander confessed, no longer frightened by his lost love's paranormal apparition. "I do. I always will. But..." He touched her face, knowing it would feel as though he had placed his palm over a sheet of glass. "Do you want me to be happy as well? How could I ever feel at peace with myself, knowing that I will never see you whole again, healthy and flourishing?"

"I want you to come to terms yourself," Isla replied. "I never expected for our connection to be divided between two worlds, forcing us to be apart in ways we could not imagine. But I must ensure you understand; my dying wish was for you to live. Not as a man full of

grief and despair over a love that is buried six feet under, but as a man who has accepted the losses he has suffered, and uses them to grow." She gazed over the open waters, the black waves wailing and snapping at the edge of the bridge. The same river that had urged Alexander to throw away his life. "I know my death has pushed you to the point of no return, but I pray that my presence here has changed your mind. Do not let your inner battle tempt you into discarding something so valuable. Dwell no further on what has been lost." She placed her freezing hands in Alexander's, and only then did he remember the metal sting of the engagement ring, clutched tight in his grasp. "It's beautiful. The ring. I'm sorry I was not able to wear it." Alexander sighed. He felt angry with himself for being so selfish. Now she was apologizing for her death. Her kindhearted soul never failed to impress him.

"I bought it when I first heard from you after I left. I wanted to come back, Isla. It's just...I didn't have enough time. I've never had enough time." For the first time since she had reentered the living world, Isla smiled.

"I understand. And I forgive you." She gingerly placed her arms around him and wrapped him in a hug. Although her skin was ice-cold, the embrace felt...oddly warm. As though he was finally home.

"Thank you," Alexander whispered as they drifted apart.

"You are a bright man, Alexander. Step away from your mind, step away from the visions that haunt you, step away from your woeful regrets, losses, and desires. There is so much you have to live for. Your mother, a strong and capable woman. Your sister, humble and modest. And me. If not for anyone else, do this for me. Now, I wish for you to be strong. I wish for you to love again. I wish for you to live."

With her final proclamation, she bowed her head as her form vanished.

Alexander heard Isla's last request. Opening his clenched fist, he examined the ornate swirls and jewels of the ring that he had meant to give her long ago. His eyes closing, the tears finally obeyed, shrinking away from sight. With a heavy heart, he gripped the engagement ring in his hand, drew his arm back, and threw the ring as far as he could. He watched the glittering diamond soar through the air, sparkling and twinkling against the fading daylight sky, before plummeting towards the water, disappearing into its inky depths. He was done with dead love. Tonight, he would let go of what was in the past and look towards the future.

He gave the edge of the bridge one last glance before walking back home. Night had fallen by the time he passed through the thick rows of buildings. Dark gray clouds shrouded the moon, casting a dim glow on the sleeping city, illuminating the empty streets and waking the quiet creatures of the night. At night, the streets had lost most of the busy daytime cacophony, with barely a muffled screech of a crow or a dainty ding of a shop bell, but he preferred it that way. The silence allowed his mind to be at ease, a clear

space for him to walk and think. As he walked along the freshly-paved sidewalk, he held Isla's prayer close to his heart, vowing that he would keep his promise to her. He would live as a new man, and he would let go of false dreams that would never come to fruition. Isla would be proud.

That night, he walked home with a lighter, more animated step. His mother had taken up temporary residence at his home, and her splendid cooking never failed to fill the house with the delectable aroma of a freshly-cooked meal. He could almost taste the deliciously seasoned steak, hear the sound of the delightful sizzle, and he wondered if he would tell her what had happened. No, he thought. She ought not to know. Let her remain within her peaceful oblivion.

Turning the corner, a light suddenly flashed in his eyes, brilliant and blinding. Rays of light washed over him, and Alexander had the feeling that perhaps Isla had come back for him. The glow of the light matched the shining aura that had surrounded her. Sound filled his ears— Alexander assumed that harps and delicate angels were singing down on him from Heaven, but at the same time, it sounded angry, aggressive...almost like...

Still, hopeful and anticipating, he reached out his arms, thinking that she had returned.

The light drew closer, closer, closer still...and he was free.

The next day, as the sun slowly rose into the sky, painting the fluffy white clouds with a fiery glow, Alexander's mother lounged in her favorite chair, sipping tea from her favorite cup as she read the morning paper, her graying curls draped over her shoulders in a loose style. Upon reading the headline, her mouth dropped wide in shock as she let out a dreadful cry. A terrible scream rushed over her vocal chords, piercing the peaceful silence of the apartment, and the porcelain teacup flew from her shaking hands, shattering against the cold hardwood floor. Alexander's sister rushed into the room, startled by the sudden noise, demanding why her mother had made such a sound. She caught a glimpse of the newspaper's front page and immediately collapsed, her eyes streaming with tears. The two women dissolved into grief as they learned about the loss of a beloved brother and son.

His body, mangled in a fatal auto wreck, had been discovered that morning.

Student Name: Aien Du  
Grade: 10  
School: St. John's School  
Title: Me Against the World: My Odyssey  
Category: Personal Essay & Memoir  
Key: Silver Key  
Educator:

For the first five years of my swimming career, I was the runt of the bunch, the weeds, overshadowed by the taller, better flowers. My two best friends, younger and faster, consistently outshined me. While they collected medal after medal, I struggled to not place dead last.

More often than not, parents, coaches, and teammates blatantly ignored me while my friends received showers of compliments and recognition. It was common knowledge that my success in swimming was not in the path of my future.

Eventually, I too accepted those standards and believed that I could simply blame the inevitable future for my lack of athletic prowess. I was not good at swimming. I was never going to be, and I had to learn to accept it. People said that my swimming equated to a hobby, an idea that was brought up every day.

After years of internalized manipulation, allowing others to mold my identity, and accepting a “sealed fate” without attempting to appeal, something clicked.

One especially hot night, I lay flat, belly up on my twin-sized bed, watching the ceiling as the glow-in-the-dark stick-on stars stared back at me while my coach's words swam laps inside my head. Tonight was going to be another restless night contemplating my life choices. Finally exhausted, sleep won out, and I drifted into unconsciousness. While my body lay limp and asleep, my mind stirred with a new mindset. A mindset that would break the barriers of my predetermined fate.

Embarking on my newfound idea, I paraded into my parents’ room, and proudly announced my definite participation as a U.S Swimmer in the 2024 Paris Olympics. My dad chuckled, my mom faked a cheer, but they both thought the same thing. The same girl

who consistently used the bathroom to skip practice, complained about training, and put the bare minimum into meets, would never reach the Olympics.

To everyone around me, my fate certainly did not include my participation in the largest athletic stage in the world. But to me, I held my future in my hands, my sails.

From that day on, I trained harder than I had ever trained before. Lap after lap, stroke after stroke, and kick after kick, I swam. The pain and adrenaline coursing through my veins invigorated a feeling inside of me: yearning. I yearned to prove myself to others, but more importantly, to myself. I wanted, no, needed, to know that my worth and capability deserved recognition.

When do you know you've made it? When do you realize all your troubles have been worth it? When do you reap what you've sown? I asked myself these tantalizing questions every day, knowing the answer would only come with time.

In the summer of 2021, those same two best friends switched to a different team, leaving me. Curious, I asked, "Why are y'all leaving?"

They replied, "The new team has a lot of fast girls. Our parents wanted us to have faster people we could swim with to challenge us."

Like each first plunge into the pool, a wave of shock and numbness washed over me. I took this personally, even if they didn't mean it. I decided they left this team because I was too slow, because I wasn't good enough for them.

On that day, a little part of our friendship was lost, but a pained fury infused with desire settled within me. Their words sparked a fire with no end, but different from wildfires, I controlled the flames. I had the power and I directed my sails opposite to where everyone else expected me to dock.

Days passed and my fire grew stronger. Weeks passed and all my emotions were put into practice. Months passed and my friends and I no longer talked. Before I knew it, the

annual Regional Championships were a week away. My passion blinded me from reality. I entered another dimension where I had full control over my fate—it was my free will.

That was power.

Soon, the first meet of the season rolled around the corner. Through my blinding passion, I had slowly changed, both mentally and physically. Fresh with darker tan lines, the ones that criss-crossed and formed a large hole in my back, I took on the meet without any hesitation or doubt. It was going to take a lot more than just fear to stop my redemption, my human-like resurrection.

As I took the last couple of strokes, I breathed at the wrong time, inhaling a mouthful of chlorinated water. When I finished, a hollow feeling replaced my confidence. The board reflected a neon red number, I added time. At this point, swimming to prove my friends, coaches, or parents, disappeared with each stroke. I was swimming for myself.

After my disappointing morning swim, I collected all the opportunities for error and deleted them from my mind. To me, the near future which I planned had no mistakes, no hesitation—only success. Determining my future paved a direct pathway to my goal; this instance was to outdo my expectations of myself, and also a bonus to prove other's opinions wrong.

Well-fed and rested, I entered the natatorium with a new perspective. The chlorine smelled weaker, the lights dimmer, and most of all, the pool felt shorter. While all of this was a placebo effect inside my head, it was because of the redirection of my sails.

As I stepped onto the block, my mind blanked, but my body took over. After numerous weeks of training, it became autonomous. A loud distorted voice blasted through the speakers.

Swimmers

My feet found the ledge, my arms swung loosely in front of my eyes, and my back stiffened.

Take your mark.

I inhaled. Everything tensed.

GO!

Both hands slam into the wall as I collapse beneath the water, exhausted. My best event was the 100-meter butterfly. While most consider butterfly to be a unique way of drowning, I felt like I was flying during my race. Using the last of my energy, I tilted my head up. I placed 3rd.

I had made the top three in the entire region of the Gulf Coast. My eyes shifted slightly towards the right and landed on my time: 1:07:94. I qualified for state by five-hundredths of a second.

As I climbed out of the pool, my ex-best friends ran up to me, smiles plastered across their faces.

“OH MY GOD! THIS IS HUGE! YOU MADE STATE!”

I smiled, but secretly, my insides cringed at their syrupy sweet voice, dripping with insincerity. Would their reaction be the same had I placed last? Snapping me out of my thoughts, one of them asked, “When did you get so fast? I couldn’t believe it when I saw you swim, you’ve changed so much since I’ve last seen you.”

I had always imagined this moment, playing it out before I went to bed each night. I cosplayed their reaction, expecting their shock and guilt to serve as sweet vengeance. I thought I would enjoy the moments when I finally received the recognition I well-deserved. Yet their comments left me feeling empty and further betrayed.

The words, "I couldn't believe it," stabbed me as each second passed. They had just witnessed my capability; yet, they still chose to believe the fate society pre-determined months ago. They had only seen the reapings, not the work I sowed. If I had listened to their words, I would not be where I was today, the sails wouldn't have taken me home.

Student Name: Mila Craig  
Grade: 8  
School: St. John's School  
Title: Midnight Memories  
Category: Flash Fiction  
Key: Silver Key  
Educator: Michael Seckman

Sighing and throwing her notebook into her backpack, Ava glanced at the clock. She placed her head on the cool surface of her desk and closed her eyes, groaning. She had spent over three hours on homework. Ava yawned, then dragged herself away from the desk. She moved sluggishly through her nightly routine, showering, changing into pajamas, brushing her hair and teeth. Before her mom had passed away, Ava had been in bed early every night. Now that she was in charge of making dinner and doing laundry and cleaning, she was rarely ready for bed at a respectable time and leisure evaporated from her life. And while the prospect of staying up so late once would have excited her, Ava quickly discovered that getting short of seven hours of sleep every night could not sustain a teenage girl.

Despite tiring her, Ava didn't mind the extra chores. In a way, they had helped her cope with her loss. When her mother had died, Ava couldn't bear the grief. She did nothing besides schoolwork for weeks on end, avoiding friends and going straight to her room when she got home. Her family lived off of meals sent by distant relatives, her father's grilled cheeses, and takeout Chinese food. But one day, surprising everyone, including herself, Ava picked up her mom's old cookbook.

As a young child, Ava had watched in awe as her mother prepared meals that were as beautiful as they were delicious. She had seemed impossibly elegant, despite her bare feet and the fact that she almost always spilled something on her clothing. Some of Ava's favorite memories involved delicious smells wafting through the steam that always shrouded her mother in an unearthly glow.

Now Ava flipped through her mother's cookbooks each night and spent hours analyzing the basic recipes, struggling to prepare them exactly how her mom had. She chose a new meal each day when she got home from school and worked to perfect it. She had decided that the cooking was worth it to feel closer to her mom, even if it meant she slept significantly less.

Ava blinked, realizing she had been lost in thought and brushing her teeth for a solid five minutes. She quickly rinsed out her mouth, then walked to her parents' room, where she, her father, and her little brother, James, had all been sleeping since her mom had passed. Lights glowed from nearly every room in the house, so she figured the boys were still

watching the baseball game on TV. However, she walked into the room to find her dad and brother sound asleep. It was now even later than usual, so Ava was tempted to just climb into bed. However, glancing again at her peacefully sleeping family, she turned and went downstairs.

First, Ava prepared lunches for herself and James and placed them in the fridge. Then she picked up James' book, shoes, and water bottle and set them in his backpack. Flicking off the lights, she went back upstairs. She shut down the rest of the house, walking to her room, James' room, back to her bathroom, and then to the guest room that doubled as her father's office. Although they all slept together now, their respective rooms were still used daily.

As she was leaving the guest room, something caught Ava's eye. Flicking the lights back on, she drew closer to the photograph her father had taped to the corner of his desktop screen. Simply seeing the photo brought a melancholy smile to her face. It had been taken last summer, before her mother had been diagnosed with cancer, and showed the whole family standing at the beach. Her dad was tickling James, who had refused to smile, and she was standing on her tiptoes, trying to look taller than her mom. However, she had quickly caught on and draped an arm over Ava's head, leaning playfully on her. Ava had once thought of it as nothing more than a terrible picture to be embarrassed of, but the photo now held on to a bittersweet memory. Stepping back, Ava realized that she was now taller than her mom had ever been. In fact, at just fourteen, she towered over most everyone she knew.

Ava walked back into her parents' room, quietly cursing when she saw the clock. It was well after midnight, but her journey through the house and the memories it brought had made her forget just how tired she was. She turned off the final light in the house, a lamp on her father's bedside table, before realizing that the TV was still on. She searched for the remote, finding it tucked between James and her dad. Careful not to wake them, Ava gently removed the remote. She succeeded and pressed the power button, remembering just too late that the TV made a loud noise when turned off. Hissing and whipping around, Ava found her father sitting up drowsily.

"What are you doing, Jenny?" he mumbled, mistaking Ava for her mother. He glanced at the clock. "Why are you still up?"

"Dad, it's me," Ava replied in a hushed tone, "and don't worry about it. I'm just turning off the TV."

Still half-asleep yet content with this response, he rolled back over, and Ava soon heard his snoring resume. Still, she held her breath, knowing that if James woke, it wouldn't be so easy to get him back to sleep. After a moment of silence, however, she decided she was safe. She tiptoed around to her side of the bed, snuggling under the warm covers. Her dad slept where he always had, her brother was in the middle, and she had taken over her mom's spot. She thought again of the photo on the computer, how her mother

had glowed golden in the light of the beach. Ava had always looked up to her, had always tried to impress her. Now she smiled, knowing that, wherever she was, her mom would be proud.

Student Name: Nia Shetty

Grade: 9

School: St. John's School

Title: My illa ; My home

Category: Poetry

Key: Silver Key

Educator:

the dawn shines light on the wilted flowers,  
a fresh start, uprooted from their soil  
the only place they could call their illa, their home  
now they're tossed out of their nest, into the air  
learning how to fly without a manual

i am the daughter of immigrants  
who were tired but not broken  
in a house, still searching for a home  
welcomed this country with open hands,  
each crease telling their rich story,  
unlocking the foreign floodgates of forgotten memories

i am the daughter of immigrants  
but i muster up all my strength  
just for my mother tongue to reach the top of my mouth  
it burns, stings, why can't i remember?  
they carried it on their backs only for me  
to leave it on the bridge between the two countries

i am the daughter of immigrants

echoes of ancestral whispers  
spices that spell out the name of my ancestral home  
sacrifices are second nature,  
the feeling of exhaustion too familiar  
but so is being a warrior  
weakness is missing from our vocabulary  
these silent heroes are found in my home

i am the daughter of immigrants  
they were told to replace the  
orange, white and green with red, white, and blue  
but they forged their own rainbow in me

i am the daughter of immigrants  
a living embodiment of tales untold  
as my identity unfolds  
i am the only connection between  
their past and present  
i am proof of the home they created

i am the daughter of immigrants  
two birds that set off blind into the distance  
only guided by the treasure hunt of  
finding the american dream  
they found each other in this new land,  
in this strange, foreign place  
in each other unearthing the comfort of their illa

i am the daughter of immigrants

and i will never forget

Student Name: Kavan Pandya

Grade: 8

School: St. John's School

Title: Outside

Category: Poetry

Key: Silver Key

Educator: Michael Seckman

The controlling urban expanse takes over.

Filled with lines of bleak, lifeless, black and white row houses.

Controlled with beeping, and everlasting noise, noise, NOISE.

The city never sleeps, they say, with its beeping, mowing, zooming.

It is covered with a layer of gold, tricking people into living in the megalopolis.

But outside, outside of the city, there is peace.

The rolling hills , filled with plains and forests alleviate the mind .

The heavenly life of the abode must be here.

Here, I discovered what it means to be free, outside.

Student Name: Enbao Cao  
Grade: 11  
School: St. John's School  
Title: Pipe Dream  
Category: Personal Essay & Memoir  
Key: Silver Key  
Educator:

The clarinet resembled an extraterrestrial animal more than it did a musical instrument. Split into four unequal segments, its curved, dull silver keys were scattered across the tube, clumping in threes and fours. Even with my inexperience, I sensed that my clarinet certainly endured years of hardship. The wooden body had an uncountable amount of scratches, and the gleam of the silver keys had been obscured by dust and dirt. With its appearance and demeanor of an old, jaded man, the instrument exuded an unwelcoming aura.

“So, why me? Just because of your friends? Do you know what I even sound like?” grumbled the clarinet.

I couldn't sugarcoat my answer. Owned and loved by others, the clarinet was not my instrument in any way. Recovering from a hostile first introduction, I shuttered with trepidation when my teacher cued me to play. My hands ran across its surface, feeling the protruding keys and searching for a comfortable resting place. Like planes crashing into a dense forest, my fingers bumped into the sharp edges of various mechanisms on the clarinet's surface. I brought the mouthpiece to my lips, forming my creative interpretation of a proper position. The dry, unpleasant reed attached to the mouthpiece tasted like a slice of tree. Fueled by a shaky breath, my first sound cried out like a baby bird, fueled by its desperation for food, and faded out in whimpering defeat. What remained of the lesson was a series of call-and-responses between me and my teacher.

“Listen to me. Listen to my tone and make yours as similar as possible.”

I responded on the clarinet, with an adjusted, unnatural note. What an obscure, confusing exercise! I felt like I was dropped into a foreign land, where everyone spoke in strange vocalizations. I couldn't speak the language of clarinet, and I was only imitating another's speech. My task was to learn how to speak, but I had to try every possible sentence out

loud. Returning home that day, I suppressed my frustration towards the clarinet. I couldn't play the notes in tune or move my fingers to produce different notes. I didn't even know the extent of my inability. Beneath under my raging annoyance, sparks of motivation fueled my practices.

I spent my summer days in the guest room closet. The ceiling light shone exceedingly bright from lack of use. Besides the racks of dusty shirts and coats, each closet shelf and wall was also painted pristine white. My scattered pages of inky notes, round ovals with tall stems, bravely contrasted the bleached surroundings. I set my eyes on two new All-State etudes: I had a few months until a live audition. The closet had its merits; every time my tongue lingered on the reed, the unappealing pthuh sound echoed over and over. Four towering walls eagerly magnified every wrong note, articulation, pick-up entrance, and downbeat back into my ears. However, the claustrophobic closet environment poisoned my attitude. The constant pulse of my metronome was a seething reminder that I couldn't even play at a slow tempo, and the white walls reflected the apathy of the closet, the house, and the school. What others saw as a simple hobby dominated the majority of my day and demanded skills I didn't have. Repeating day after day, my unpleasant practice culminated in an illness of feverish headaches, throat pain, and inescapable fatigue. After a miserable week of withering in bed, I decided that I needed a new perspective on clarinet.

Upon my recovery, I turned the fluorescent closet light back on. Still assembled, my clarinet seemed to scold me for my weeklong absence. I carried my music stand and etude books out of the closet and placed them next to a window. Time seemed to accelerate when I was sick, as the All-State audition loomed only a month away. Starting anew, I practiced for the joy of it. Instead of finding the faults in a dejected, tonally flat note, I chose to see the gradual improvements in its voice. The vibrant, rich sound of the clarinet was calming and inspiring to execute correctly. While each musical phrase used to sound like a minefield of grave errors, it now encapsulated the fluidity and elegance of a stream. The metronome in the background seemed like a gentle rhythmic reminder rather than the unstoppable ticking of a timer, clicking on and on at 100, 108, 116, 124, and finally 132 beats per minute. The night before the audition, my proficiency in the pieces felt like a skyscraper of scaffolding. The structure was shaky, but I had reached the goal.

The next day, I arrived to see a cluster of clarinet players waiting to be called for the audition. The sheer abundance of suits and ties flooded the music hall with the musty smell of wardrobes. Thirty names, including mine, echoed through the auditorium. As the competition officials herded us into the chilled room, I saw five balding, impassive judges facing our seats. Set between these two areas, the audition seat intimidated me upon my entrance.

“Adagio: beginning to measure eighty three. Lento: beginning to end.” The judge in the middle boomed aggressively, silencing all nervous whispers.

The room erupted into frantic flipping of pages, soft impacts of clarinet keys, and the rush of air passing through wooden tubes as players ran through their final practice. I looked through the cut, scanning each line and reassuring myself that I had muscle memory for every trouble spot. The diversity of every player’s interpretation was astounding; depending on the clarinetist, the same section could be played with rapid, precise virtuosity or expressive, heart-wrenching rubato. I was so focused on their style that I was startled by the call of my name. My heart’s adrenaline-fueled pumps were the only thing I could hear, providing an incredibly inconsistent metronome that comically outpaced the target tempo. The cold, dry mouthpiece was reminiscent of my first day, on which my reed couldn’t even guarantee a response. I formed my embouchure, sealing the mouthpiece tight, and counted internally. 1, 2, 3, ... After a few painstaking seconds of silence, my first note rang out. To my comfort, my fingers knew where to go, shifting from position to position like a computer program. Each successive measure felt like climbing up a rung of the scaffolding. Don’t look down! I couldn’t let thinking about performance quality and minuscule mistakes distract me from finishing the two etudes. My fingers settled on the final note. A collection of foot stomps, the musician’s equivalent of polite applause, replaced the sound of my clarinet. Relieved and light-headed, I stumbled back to my seat.

I anxiously awaited the results. Finally, a notification slid into the corner of my computer: 1 new Gmail notification. I clicked into the email’s attached spreadsheet and saw my name fourth from the top. All State! I made it! My euphoria came with the residual feeling that I didn’t deserve it. I felt like I was an impostor trying to blend in with talent, creating sounds that appealed to the judges instead of truly expressing myself. I’d thought that qualifying for All-State would finally justify my decision to pick up the clarinet, like a badge of honor.

Texting this empty accomplishment to my parents, I noticed something peculiar about my hands. As if the keyboard’s middle row were the holes in a clarinet, my hands were perfectly positioned over them. I moved my fingers as little as possible while typing, and pressing a key comprised of a soft touch and an immediate lift. To my surprise, my clarinet technique had pervaded my everyday typing. Once I grew conscious of this habit, I realized how many aspects of my life were influenced by my clarinet practice. I perused my playlist of favorite classical and jazz clarinet pieces. I scrolled through countless masterpieces, like Beethoven’s Pastoral Symphony, Borodin’s Polovtsian Dances, and Mozart’s Concerto in A. Looking at the pieces’ names, I couldn’t recount the musical structures, but I could describe the interval of each clarinet solo down to the second.

Striving for proficiency on the clarinet didn't make me more of a clarinet player. Rather, the traits of a clarinetist developed within me as I grew to appreciate the instrument over time. My clarinet's years of wear was not intimidating, but rather a sign of its reliability to produce such beautiful sounds from player to player. I had mistaken its experience for bitterness.

After many years, my instrument is bound to reach its resting place in my closet. Nevertheless, through subtle mannerisms I might not even catch, I'll always be a clarinetist.

Student Name: Katharine Yao  
Grade: 11  
School: St. John's School  
Title: Procrastinator's Pantoum  
Category: Poetry  
Key: Silver Key  
Educator: Warren Rawson

She stifles a midnight yawn,  
Staring at the glowing screen  
Another day and another dawn:  
Such is the life of a typical teen.

Staring at the glowing screen,  
Her fingers fly across the keys.  
Such is the life of a typical teen:  
Working hard to find her peace.

Her fingers fly across the key,  
For the work ethic she needs to upkeep;  
Working hard to find her peace,  
Determined not to succumb to sleep.

The work ethic she needs to upkeep,  
Stifling a midnight yawn,  
Determined not to succumb to sleep  
Until another day and another dawn.

Student Name: William Burger

Grade: 8

School: St. John's School

Title: Skiing Disaster

Category: Flash Fiction

Key: Silver Key

Educator: Michael Seckman

It was cold day, one that would make a polar bear shiver. Everyone was swaddled up in their jackets like babies. Robert, an energetic boy, had hair as white as the snow beneath them. John, an adventurous boy, had hair as black as a midnight sky. Even though the two of them had not known each other before ski school, they connected instantly. They were like peanut butter and jelly. But this day was unlike the others; it was snowing so much that you could not even see your own hands if they were right in front of you! But John and Robert still skied despite not being able to see each other.

"We are a bit behind the group. Should we speed up?" John asked

"Eh, I think we will be ok," Robert responded. So they kept on joking around and Robert even pushed John down. His skis flew off and he lay down like a tired puppy. Having to wait for John to get up and retrieve his skis and put them back on, John and Robert were now way behind the group. Now, with a sense of urgency, they skied much faster to catch up to the group. Suddenly, Robert's skis went over a stick that was kicked up by the group ahead. He was flung to the side into the rough unpaved snow drift, his legs collapsing, his skis popping off and flying into the distance. Before the snow could drag him all the way down, a tree appeared right in front of him. He slammed into the tree, his face buried in the tree bark, and his legs and arms wrapped around the tree as if he were giving it a hug.

John rushed over to the crumpled remains of Robert, a lifeless lump of crushed bones and blood spewing out like the Mississippi River. John fell to the soft crunchy snow and gently placed Robert's head into his lap, cradling him like a newborn. John felt a hot tear roll down his cheek and land in the cut in Robert's head.

"Why? Why did this have to happen to you?" John screamed while holding back tears.

"Wake up! Please wake up!" John yelled as he slapped Robert's face to get him back to life. Robert suddenly sputtered back to life and lifted his head off Robert's legs.

Robert tried to form a sentence, but the hit to the head made it hard for him to think, but he managed to ask, "what happened?"

"You skied into a tree and hit your head. We should go get help," John responded.

"Ok, help me up," Robert demanded. Robert stuck out his hand, and John pulled him up. He tried to take a step forward, but the hit to the head made him dizzy, and when he put weight on his foot, he screamed in agony and fell back down.

"I can not move. You need to go get help alone," Robert said, grimacing in pain.

"But I can not leave you here alone. What if you bleed out and die or a bear comes and eats you?" John responded.

"It is a risk we will have to take," Robert said.

"Ok I will be fast, don't worry. And do not die on me," John joked.

"I will try," Robert said with a smile. John set out to find some help with a sense of urgency, going faster than his skis could take him. He finally made it out of the off-road trail and was thrown into a major run with skiers and snowboarders whizzing past him. One snowboarder clipped his shoulder, and he too was thrown to the side into the trees. He was lucky enough to not hit a tree but he landed on the side of his leg that snapped like a twig.

"Ahhhhhh, my leg! Someone help!" He screamed in agony. But no one seemed to hear his pleads. He struggled to get up, and when he did, the pain was so agonizing that he fell down to the ground. He thought about giving up but he could not let Robert die, so he pushed through the pain and skied down to the base of the mountain to find help. He finally found the ski patrol and barged into the building.

"I need help! My friend hit a tree!" He yelled.

"Where?" One of them asked.

"On the catwalk right before the major run," he responded. They got on a snowmobile and climbed the mountain in search of Robert.

"He is right there," John yelled over the engine of the snowmobile. They made a hard right turn that almost sent John flying off. When they reached Robert, a lifeless shell clenching his jacket, he was barely conscious.

"Everything is going to be ok. We are going to get you out of here and fix you up," the ranger said. They loaded him onto the snowmobile and drove him to the hospital, and that was the last time John would ever see Robert again.

Student Name: Isabella Oliver  
Grade: 8  
School: St. John's School  
Title: The Detour to Germany  
Category: Personal Essay & Memoir  
Key: Silver Key  
Educator: Michael Seckman

“Ladies and gentlemen, we are sorry to inform you that most of the connecting flights have already taken off by now. We promise to have you off the plane as soon as possible.”

Here we go again, I thought. Little did I know what was to come in this chaotic travel week. My family and I were headed to Portugal, Spain. The small city we were flying to was not a direct flight, so we were on a connecting flight, adding to the destinations of this trip. The Lufthansa plane launched us overseas and landed us in a German airport.

I had finally gotten comfortable after nine hours on the plane when we began to deboard. Over five hundred sleep deprived humans dragged their feet off the double decker plane at once, passengers surrounding me, irritated and exhausted. I reached the door, separated from my family members, and we hopped off, squeezing by many slow passengers. A few more steps and we were out of the boarding bridge, sprinting towards our gate, lost in the process. Knowing the chance we would miss our flight had become more likely, we picked up our pace. Right when we thought we were close, we reached a customs station, holding us back from our gate.

“Are you kidding me?!” exclaimed my parents, looking at their watches. After waiting for what seemed like hours, we achieved the journey of the atrocious line in the customs station. Our jaws dropped when we saw that behind customs was a security station with a line far from short. Two giants walked in the room, automatic guns in their hands, heavy and bulky, their clothes, a type of German security uniform. They began stomping around the room, intimidating looks on their faces. When our turn came around, the airport workers shoved us over to the metal detector and forced us through. Cleared by security, we walked to grab our carry-on bags. Our bags came out of the metal machine one by one. My dad’s black bag tumbled down the ramp, and the security officer tossed the bag over to the examining table. They laid it flat on the table, all of his belongings sprawled out and exposed, the security with the heavy guns inspecting my father’s apple charging cords. This reminded me of a movie scene. I couldn’t believe it was real. Although the situation bothered us, we did not even think to inquire with the security giants about the inspection, afraid of what would happen. After some unnecessary searching they cleared his bag, and once again, we took off running towards the gate. We hoped and prayed for

nothing else that would get in the way of making our flight, our impression of the airport already pretty terrible. There were rows and rows of gates and ours, of course, was at the very end of the airport. By this time we knew it was two late, but I still remained hopeful.

“Gate 104, we’re here!” I let out, panting. I looked up, and the TV screen listed a different destination with the word “boarding” next to it. Defeat flooded throughout my body as the airport worker’s voice sounded in the background. We were stuck...in Frankfurt...Germany. I didn’t know where in the world I was going to be the next day, my birthday. We looked at all our options, still in shock, and finally we gave up and chose the only realistic option, flying out on my birthday. I remained grateful that our travel plans lined up with the week of my birthday, but now I didn’t know where I would be.

Walking in defeat, we found the nearest sitting area in the airport. It hadn’t sunk in that we had missed our flight. How did this happen? We slumped down into the dirty airport chairs, unprepared for the next steps we needed to take. Hours went by sitting in the airport lounge, my dad trying to find a place for us to stay. He had finally found a hotel near the airport for us to stay, so we got up to hustle to the car, our feet moving quickly, hauling our luggage to the car pickup area. Wearily, we headed to the car, loaded up our suitcases, packed ourselves in the car. After around fifteen minutes, we pulled up to the hotel. My parents checked us in, and we were directed to the hotel restaurant, where we ate a nutritious meal, our energy increasing. For the rest of the afternoon we walked around the streets of Frankfurt, Germany. We took in the unfamiliar city for some time and then headed back up to our room to relax. That night I went to bed, my hands gripping my favorite stuffed animal, thinking about the experience of missing a flight. The next morning I woke up. Portugal on my mind, I got dressed and packed up my belongings. We took off for the airport after we had thoroughly checked through the rooms. We arrived at the airport, checked our bags, boarded the plane, and landed in Portugal.

After arriving in Portugal, we headed to the restaurant that our tour group arrived at. We had missed the meet the group day because of our flight dilemma. When we walked in, two kind voices welcomed us to the group, our tour guides. We joined in and went on to have an amazing trip. Not until that night did I realize that I left the most important object in my life, my pink bear. I searched through my bag over and over again, even when I knew it wasn’t in there. Panic rushed through my body, the walls closing in on me as I sat in sadness thinking about pink bear. Pink bear, the gift I was given from my parents on the day I was born. The small bear that was no longer pink, from wear, but a grayish-purple. Pink bear, his cotton frayed, making his fur rough in a comforting way. The bear that meant family, that I held in my hand almost every night. Both my sister and I had pink bears, they were something we shared, something familiar. The one that I purposely never brought on trips or to school nap times when I was little, knowing I would lose him. The one time I brought it so that I didn’t have to be away from it for two weeks I lost it. Would I ever get it back?

Student Name: Alyssa Theofanidis

Grade: 9

School: St. John's School

Title: The First Fire

Category: Poetry

Key: Silver Key

Educator:

I.

I study the island from afar with Raven circling above the chaos. Golden, scarlet, flames devouring the sycamore tree. Flaming branches envelop his wooden counterparts. Waving through the sky, Flickering in a fantastical, tantalizing greeting. We've tried to say hello, But the fire is untouchable. Free to engulf anything it pleases.

II.

Raven soars back to our land, empty handed except for her quiet defeat. Whispers of pity and despair erupt as the animals notice her once beautiful feathers, tainted a permanent charcoal. The heat was too strong. She couldn't carry it back herself. One by one, the animals have returned without fire from the island. The bear, the owls, and now Raven. I can sense a growing uneasiness among the crowd of animals. How can we survive without warmth, without light?

Everyone searches for answers in Raven's scarred face. No one volunteers to try next.

III.

I am quiet when I muster up a volunteer to collect an ember. They don't hear me at first, So I say it louder. "I'll go," Whispers erupt again. "The little water spider?" they question. Yes, the little water spider.

IV.

My hands are strong and my mind is fickle as I spin my thread into a small bowl. I brush off the image of the fallen soldiers returning with soot and bruises on their faces And venture off across the water, eyeing the beast getting closer.

V.

The fire gets larger And hotter as I paddle toward the haze. Glare from the emblazoned light stings my eyes. Heat shrinks me to an even smaller spider than I am. I march to the outskirts of the inferno At the bottom of the tree. An ember pops off from the fire, and I scoop it into my bowl, Narrowly escaping the fire's waiting jaws

VI.

I can sense the animals' eyes on me in disbelief As I dance back across the water, Hot coals seething into my back. I can't decide which burns more.

Student Name: Madison Bibb

Grade: 10

School: St. John's School

Title: The Grave Conversation: A Continuation of Act Two; Scene One in Macbeth

Category: Dramatic Script

Key: Silver Key

Educator: Matthew Wells

Macbeth

Here I sit with a dagger that calls for me to execute the task I have been sent to perform. A twang of hesitation overrides my thoughts as I hover above the body. The crispness of his linens and clothing become clear to me only at this moment. A clean, pure white is perfectly placed over his wrinkled but powerful body. Placed perfectly in the center of his bed, he appears content and at peace. Why do these miniscule details only become apparent to me now? I find myself noting such unimportant details in order to further put off the task at hand. I begin to think about how he woke up this morning lacking the slightest concern for his safety, excited to share a meal with the Thane of Cawdor. Little does he know the Thane of Cawdor now stands over him wishing death upon the man who bestowed the esteemed position onto him. How strange is it that he who has the most power in the kingdom is now left in this moment with no power at all? With no defenses against my dagger and I, the king, for the first time, appears weak. In one second a dagger the length of a hand can take away every title, every ranking, and every breath. Who am I to disturb his temporary slumber with a permanence that will never allow him to open his eyes again? He has already seen the world for the last time, not expecting to never see it again. Taking the beauty of life away appears to be a task I cannot easily bring myself to complete. The dagger begins to grow heavy in my hand as I hold it above the king.

Witch 3

You're stalling.

Macbeth

Who dares to enter the king's chambers at this hour? Show yourself at once!

Enter Witch 1, 2, and 3

Witch 1

Why do you stall to make haste? You know that once he dies you take his place?

Macbeth

I do not know if I wish to take his place. I was simply told this was something I had to do. If my becoming king costs the life of an innocent and pure man, I do not want it.

Witch 2

The title of king is one that most people could only dream of pursuing. Do not allow your conscience to be the root of your undoing.

Macbeth

If I do this I do not think I would be able to live with myself. My guilt would drive me to insanity. I would not revel in the glorious ranking of king because I would not be able to forget the terrible crime I've committed. I'm not a murderer nor a killer. It is simply not in my nature, and it is not something I wish to implement into my repertoire. Please, go from whence you came and never speak about what you have seen here tonight.

Witch 2

If you allow your morality to dictate your decisions you will never be a successful leader. You fold at the first sign of a challenge and your gullible soul makes you weaker.

Witch 3

Weaker.

Witch 1

Weaker.

Witch 3

And what of your wife? Ignoring her wishes would be the worst way to mistreat her.

Witch 3

Mistreat her.

Witch 1

Mistreat her.

Macbeth

How dare you?! You have mistreated her! The nerve you must have to enter here and blame me for the problem you have caused! Your prophecies have morphed her into a person I have never seen before. I refuse to change into something I am not because of three women in dark capes! Someone will die here tonight. If it is not Duncan, it will be me at my own hand to end this misery. There is no right answer. Both options will cause someone pain.

Witch 1

Pain.

Witch 2

Pain.

Witch 3

Pain. Pain is a figment of the imagination. Solely conjured by your mind as a way to interpret the situation. You think too much. Overthinking causes the pain you feel. The task at hand is simply a solution to conceal your weak demeanor. You are the only thing that stands between yourself and your redeemer.

Witch 1

Redeemer.

Witch 2

Redeemer.

Macbeth

I should deserve to die after I complete this task. I will become a version of myself that I never wished to bring to life. A demon. A killer. A murderer. I feel embarrassed that this is what my life has come to. I always looked down upon those who committed heinous crimes and now I am one of them. What will others think should they find out I was the one who killed Duncan? I would surely lose all respect for myself and my family.

Witch 1

Would you not also gain respect for yourself? You should think of the courage you'll gain. Strength is true wealth.

Witch 2

Wealth.

Witch 3

Wealth. You would win respect from many people. The task of murder is not easy and one who is able to execute others is feared by all.

Macbeth

Ok, I will complete the task. Duncan's life will end tonight. For my wife and myself, I will gain the title of king. I wish there were another way, but I must push on. Allowing my thoughts to flood my mind alters my decisions. I wish for my mind to be silent and thoughtless at this moment. The dagger loses its weight in my hand as it comes crashing down in a natural manner. Knowing exactly where to go, it guides my hand into his chest.

Exit Witch 1, 2, and 3

Macbeth

His pure appearance washes away as the blood floods his linens and clothing. I can feel myself bleeding out with him as my conscience is gutted from my soul. I'm left with only guilt and regret ringing in my ears. I should've never killed the king. I want to go back.

Witches return! Bring back the rightful king and clean this blood! I beg of you to reverse this terrible death. Why did you leave this torturous remorse upon me? My life will forever be spent under punishment. Did you wish to eternally curse me? Alas, there is no remedy to this pain. I will endure this agony for as long as my soul can bear, but it will drive me to my death.

I thought only one of us would leave dead. Turns out we both lost our lives tonight.

Exit Macbeth

Student Name: Sophia Ramachandran

Grade: 8

School: St. John's School

Title: The Hospital Room

Category: Flash Fiction

Key: Silver Key

Educator: Michael Seckman

The time sluggishly approached 5:00 p.m, each second slowly ticking down to the inevitable point of demise. The smell of metal equipment and musky death hung heavily in the air. The raging sun glared through the hospital window and onto Aubrey James' plain bed, painting the white sheets a violent amber. Scarlett Clement concluded that this small sliver of sun would be one of the last times Aubrey would be able to bask in natural light; at only thirty-two, Aubrey James was succumbing to a tumor.

When Scarlett, who'd suffered through a self-imposed decade of separation, heard of the news, she'd rushed to London, her heart pumping regret and panic into her body. Upon gazing at her former lover's face for the first time in ten years, her legs nearly buckled beneath her. The sight was almost too tragic for her to bear, too unreal for her to accept. The room was stripped dry of warmth and decor. Scarlett noticed the tenderness of Aubrey's features; she was skinnier and paler than before. Her arms were frail branches, her once golden hair dimmed to a woody brown. She also took notice of light wrinkles lining her eyes, an evident sign that Scarlett had been away for too long. What dulled her spirit, death staring her in the face or the absence of her lover?

Scarlett's arrival came as a surprise to Aubrey, who'd sent thousands of letters begging for her return after she had moved to a city hours away from London. "Why didn't you ever call?" Aubrey whispered, her words dripping with hurt. A wave of shame and pain washed over Scarlett, drowning her in what-ifs and missed opportunities. "Tell me, I'm dying anyways," Aubrey dryly laughed in an attempt to shun the heavy silence that dispersed through the air and circulated through their bodies.

"I was scared of what happened to you happening to me.," Scarlett confessed, acknowledging her own cowardice. "I mean, look at this room, Aubrey! No family, not even a 'Get Well Soon' card! They're all afraid of what you are! Of what we are," the words slipped off Scarlett's tongue like poison. The room went silent and death and acceptance and shame began to lurk in the corners of the room. Scarlett continued, "I'm sorry."

Aubrey smiled, completely disregarding everything that had just been said. "You never used to apologize, you know? You've changed a lot," she remarked.

In those ten years Scarlett refused to call, she had a lot of time by herself to think. Her fingers threatened to dial the order of numbers hundreds of times, always rebuked by the fear of judgment.

“Don’t think it’s too late, Scar. You’ve come while I’m still alive!” Aubrey grinned. “Plus, you know I have always loved you. I always will.” Regret engulfed and diminished Scarlett’s soul. Scarlett leaned over onto Aubrey’s bed, her forehead resting on the blanket. “I’m sorry,” she whispered. “I’m sorry.”

During the days that followed, Scarlett and Aubrey exchanged stories from their lives and how they managed without each other. Humor and comfort began finding their way into their words, just like how it had been when they were together. During the long nights, when the pain was nearly unbearable and Aubrey could feel her whole body throbbing, Scarlett was there to soothe Aubrey.

On one of the last days that Aubrey would be alive, Scarlett dialed her parents’ phone numbers to finally come out to them. This time Aubrey was the one holding Scarlett’s shaking hand, the body warmth reassuring her. At first, she had to convince them she was serious, and to her surprise, they had warily accepted her. “We’ll love you no matter what,” they said. “We don’t know much about this, but we’re here to support you with everything we have.” Scarlett ended the call with a click, shocked and slightly confused. Squealing happy, Aubrey tightly hugged Scarlett. She couldn’t see the regret plastered all over Scarlett’s face.

“You know what this means, right?” Scarlett asked, her voice muffled by Aubrey’s shoulder. “I could have spent so much more time with you without having been judged,” Scarlett lamented, her focus sinking down onto the slightly stained floor. Aubrey’s face contorted into a weird mix of a smile and a frown. She then started laughing hysterically until her laughter began ringing throughout the grim hallways - the pure absurdity of it all was very funny to her. Scarlett could have fixed everything if she had only communicated to her parents. In a weird, quiet way, Scarlett began giggling too, not because she found it funny but because she wanted to conceal the tears building up in her eyes.

Days later, after Scarlett and Aubrey had discussed the last of their stories and exchanged their final goodbyes, a funeral for Aubrey was held. The ceremony was barren and was littered lightly with people, none of which Scarlett knew. The eulogy was short and sweet, describing Aubrey’s life and the friends she had made along the way. No one talked about her sexuality or her ability to lighten any situation with laughter.

After casting one last glance at her lover’s gravestone, Scarlett got into her car and drove away. She could almost hear Aubrey’s faded laugh one last time, reassuring that everything would be okay.

Student Name: Kaviya Dhir  
Grade: 10  
School: St. John's School  
Title: The Light Was Never Ours  
Category: Poetry  
Key: Silver Key  
Educator:

On the bank of the Seine  
in the heath and heart  
of the sun's playground—  
that's where we lie.

Our heads rest on a cushion of plight  
as we sink further into the fields  
of lush river violets, violets  
smooching our petaled cheeks—  
blanketing our freckles from the frigid  
blistering air, softening  
our cracked lips. We smear  
violet husks across our faces  
until they crumple, shriveling  
from an absence of light  
in these mallows of mid-October  
gloom, their ominous purple filling  
the smiles across our faces before  
their sweet sugar plum scent could  
even frolic into our pores. We are  
lifeless—but we weren't always. For years

we smelled of the sun's honeyed lemons  
and orange meringue pie, raindrops  
and gifts of gold. Our eyes shimmered  
in the leathery moon's shadows—  
a crisp December glistening on the horizon.  
At the peak of our ecstasy, we giggled  
until cancer's rind of tree bark  
wrapped its treacherous ridges around  
our lungs, punted splinters down our throats  
to quench our laughter. Somehow

the wavering constellations illuminate  
the ballpoint grasses' narrow, finite hallways  
before they retract into the night sky's  
lustrous black hole, the one trapping  
each dusty auburn wish in an endless tunnel—

for more years of violet picking.  
for more lemon-scented Sundays spent  
basking in the sun's generous warmth.  
for more time—because the light was never ours.

Student Name: Nola Miles  
Grade: 8  
School: St. John's School  
Title: The Neptune Legacy  
Category: Science Fiction & Fantasy  
Key: Silver Key  
Educator: Judy Adams

I ran on the track, my sneakers thudding against the winding brick-red road. The track passed from Earth to Neptune, to Venus, to Mars, to all the planets in the solar system - a highway connecting the universe. The track, not for cars or trucks, allowed people to walk, to run, to be free. "Here I am, racing," I thought, even though I was completely alone. I stood in the second lane, heading towards Neptune. I had an envelope in my hand, the flap flipping up, allowing me to see a letter inside, addressed with my grandmother's shaky scrawl. It read, "Dear Nadia."

And then everything went black.

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I woke up to the sound of crashing thunder. The darkened sky seemed to split open with white veins of lightning, and the sun had retreated behind smudgy, charcoal clouds dumping rain on the world below. However, my thoughts strayed away from the seemingly torrential storm occurring just outside my window. My mind still lingered on my dream. Some of the events that had happened didn't make sense. The track was real—I had visited my friend Anika on Venus last Thursday. But the letter and the silence of the universe had never existed, so why did I dream of those things? It all seemed too tangible. But I brushed my speculations away, and focused on the present. Today, I planned to visit my grandparents' house. They had died a year ago, but my mother and I still wanted to visit and sort through their old photo albums and papers. Mostly, I just wanted to sit in their living room and smell washed linen and the ocean and black coffee, the scents my grandparents always carried. I missed them.

After a few moments of debating whether or not I wanted to sleep an extra five minutes, I heaved myself out of bed and trudged over to the window, drawing the worn blinds up, letting the sun burst through the glass, blinding me. I rubbed my eyes and plodded to the bathroom, rushing through my morning routine, my stomach rumbling like an earthquake. Galloping down the stairs, I raced to the kitchen to greet my mother, father, and younger brother, who were all enjoying freshly baked biscuits, scrambled eggs with cheese, and bacon, still smoking from the frying pan.

"Hi, honey, how did you sleep?" Mom asked from her seat at the table.

"I slept well, thanks," I replied.

"Do you want anything to eat, Nadia?" Dad questioned, swallowing a forkful of egg.

"Yes, but I'll grab something in a second," I said, turning to face the countertop with the leftover food.

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After breakfast, I changed into loose pants and a short-sleeved shirt. Outside, a chill rushed through the air. Dead, browned leaves fluttered to the ground from the tops of trees painted orange and red, the wind rushing through their slender branches. The sky, a shade of picture-perfect royal blue, started to clear after the early-morning rain. Mom slid into the driver's seat and I hopped in on the passenger's side. We drove in silence, taking in the gorgeous scenery on the drive to my grandparents' house. Finally, bringing the car to a halt, my mother parked in front of the cobblestone walk, stepping carefully to avoid any wobbly, loose stones. She unlocked the door with an old brass key and crossed the threshold. I walked in behind her as she marched through the hallway like an army general. When we arrived in the kitchen, photo albums in tow, we pulled out chairs to sit at the wooden table.

"Ready to begin?" Mom asked, smiling at me.

"Yep," I replied, as she opened the first album.

My mother, a wired machine, brushed the dust away and got to work, sorting photos from various times and places into distinct categories. I absentmindedly flipped through a binder, turning the pages slowly.

"Why don't you look through that box of letters?" my mother inquired.

"The small cardboard box on the shelf?" I countered.

"Yes, that's the one. Be careful when you reach for it. It might be heavy."

I reached my hands over the wooden shelving to grab the box, gingerly placing it on the table, away from the unstable structure that had once held ornate china. Now, the shelves, coated in a thick layer of dust, stood weighed down by several cartons filled with old pictures, letters, documents, and other memorabilia. I took the box into the living room and plopped down on the cushioned sofa, a more comfortable place to look through these old memories, some from the other planets around Earth. Pushing the flaps of cardboard away, I scanned the context of the box, wondering what this treasure trove might hold. At the top of the stack lay several readings from my grandparent's siblings on Venus, who were scientists. Underneath the articles, torn-cornered pictures reflected dazzling, toothy smiles of other relatives I had never met. But suddenly, I noticed a yellowed envelope under a pile of already-used greeting cards.

Hands shaking, I ripped open the envelope.

Dear Nadia,

I am writing to you to tell you about the origins of our family, since you always ask when Grandpa and I come to visit. I know that we always tell you that we immigrated from Venus like your other relatives, but that is not true.

We are from Neptune.

I understand that this may be hard for you to process, and that is why I'm writing this letter, so you can learn the truth in a slightly more pleasant way.

Your grandfather and I both grew up on Neptune when humans first discovered it. A colony formed, and we lived there until I turned fourteen. We had to leave the planet because of a horrible explosion that occurred. An unknown person set off a bomb, releasing a deadly, blue gas that developed into a massive cloud covering Neptune. Members of the colony hastily evacuated, the only way of escape being the track. So we ran, for what seemed like hours, to Venus. Luckily, the people there welcomed us with open arms, some of them our distant cousins. However, I buried a chest of valuables on Neptune, marking the location with a large, glowing X. Nadia, even if I am gone when you see this, I beg that you run the track and retrieve it. For me. For our family. I understand the danger of the poisonous gas, but you are quick and brave. Please go.

With love,

Grandma

I stood frozen, in complete shock. I couldn't believe what I had just read. A prequel to the dream I had the night before, it seemed like a sign. Maybe I should do as Grandma asked. But a danger existed in going to an abandoned planet alone, especially with the possibility of life-threatening, poisonous gas. However, I knew that that's what Grandma would've wanted me to do. And if I go, I might find the chest of valuables. And if I find the chest, maybe I will find more memories. Precious, priceless memories—memories of Grandma and Grandpa, who cannot be replaced.

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"Hey, Mom, how long will we be here?" I said, standing in the doorway of the kitchen, facing my mother.

"Probably about another hour. I'll order some food and we can eat here. I don't want us to feel rushed to drive back home, and your dad and brother left for baseball practice anyway," she replied with a tired smile.

"Sounds good. Is it alright if I go out for a short walk?"

"Of course. You probably need some fresh air. Call me when you're on your way home so I can order dinner at the right time."

“Okay, see you in a bit!” I called out, already swinging the front door shut and racing down the street to the track entrance.

When I reached the white-lined lanes, I chose the second one, as I did in my dream. I had also brought the letter with me, just in case I needed it when I got to Neptune.

Faster than the wind, I sprinted down the rough red ribbon into the universe, my light winter coat a cape, whipping against the sides of my body.

I didn’t look back.

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By the time I got to Neptune, I could barely breathe. Before entering through the planet’s track entrance, I took a moment to collect myself. I can do this, I can do this I repeated, over and over. Finally, I slowly tiptoed through the track gates and stepped on Neptune’s bouncy, cloudy blue surface. Every time I took a step, fog drifted up and around my feet and rose to my shoulders, shrouding my body in strange, bluish smoke. I took a deep breath and coughed. And coughed some more. After a full minute of hacking, I panicked, realizing that there still might be traces of poison gas in this unusual Neptune air. Surveying the barren planet, I searched for a gleaming X in the distance. I have to find the chest before it’s too late. But Neptune appeared to be a tiny planet, and I found my grandmother’s X a little while later. When I reached the spot, I raced to uncover the chest in the ground. Hurriedly digging, digging, digging, I heaved a wooden box embossed with rusted metal embellishments and a matching lock and key out of the deep, recently shoveled hole. Suddenly, curiosity overtook my mind, and I immediately opened the chest. Pictures of my young grandparents living on Neptune leaned against the sides of the battered box. An ancient map of Neptune lay resting on the bottom along with jewelry from Grandma for Mom and me. And underneath it all I found a small bottle with a pearly white, gaseous liquid inside. I uncorked the top, releasing the substance. I gasped, not because of the toxic air, but out of sheer amazement. Slowly but surely the blue fog faded away. My perpetual coughing ended. I can finally breathe! I allowed my lungs to draw in pure air, finally free of the grief of my grandparents’ death that had subconsciously burdened me. After spending a few minutes in gratitude and appreciation, I closed my eyes. Then I opened them. Realization dawned on me.

While they were extremely sentimental, Grandma didn’t just want me to take the track to this planet just to unearth an old chest of pictures and jewelry and an outdated map. She had wanted me to save our family’s legacy. She had wanted me to save Neptune.

And that was something worth fighting for.

Student Name: Lily Feather

Grade: 11

School: St. John's School

Title: True to her roots: Student's wig business provides luxury hair experience

Category: Journalism

Key: Silver Key

Educator: DAVID Nathan

Aseda Sarpong had hit a difficult stretch during her freshman year. During this time, she started to think about her life and decided that she wanted to do something for herself — start a business.

Over the summer, the concept for Anure Hair was born.

“It was just meant to be,” she said. “Wig business!”

Before long, Sarpong was looking for vendors and scheduling meetings during her free periods. For her brand logo, she designed a broken heart with a star growing inside. The image represents how the struggles she went through were “not for nothing.”

Now a junior, Sarpong launched her online store on July 6, her birthday. Since then, Sarpong’s wig and hair extension business has processed over 260 orders. She has assembled a creative team that includes models, photographers, a creative director, a stylist and a videographer.

Sarpong manages to text with her creative team throughout the day when they are working on a project. Her creative director, Denzel Lamar Washington, directs Anure’s photo shoots, creating mood boards to communicate the brand’s look.

“It helps tremendously to have a creative branding team in place,” said Frankie Bleau, Anure’s stylist.

She looks to other websites for inspiration, including Ivy Park, Beyoncé's clothing line, and used web design company It Geeks to build Anure's online platform.

Sarpong wanted her website's visuals to distinguish it from other hair extension websites, so she decided to have a photo shoot for her home page visuals. Her team featured multiple locations across the city over the course of a long day of shooting. Since Washington missed some of the shoot while flying in from New York City, Sarpong herself directed four models for the first hour.

Her creative team shot two videos of her models for the site: one candid and one a "lifestyle shoot," in which the models were "up and looking cute." Sarpong knew a manager in Atlanta who helped her contact two of the models from the shoot, and she reached out to another through Instagram.

"When you advertise it through lifestyle videos, it gets a lot of traction," she said. "I want customers to feel like they're buying an experience."

When customers visit the website, they are greeted by models showing off their wigs in a full-screen lifestyle video. "Usually big companies will have a mannequin just wear their wig," Sarpong said.

Bleau heard about the opportunity to style a high-profile look for hair. She and Bleau had an "instant connection," according to Sarpong.

"Her vision is exciting, refreshing and brand new," said Bleau.

Bleau has enjoyed working with Sarpong and expressed his admiration for her inventive business and attention to detail. "Not only does she listen, she gives feedback. If she doesn't like it, she's going to say No," Bleau said. "If she does like it, she's going to put her own spin on it in a way you would never expect."

Bleau's job is to style the models for Anure's photo shoots, pulling from different department stores once he gets the mood board for the look. After paying a rental fee for the clothing, Bleau's clients tag the brand they use in the shoot. So far, Bleau has pulled

clothes from Carolina Herrera, Gucci and Balmain to evoke Anure's "high-fashion, luxurious and expensive" look.

"Without an image, you have nothing," he said. "If nobody wants to look at you or be you, you won't get too far."

Sarpong maintains that Anure's wigs — which start at \$450 on the website but average more than \$700 — are worth the price. She wants to give customers, most of whom are African American women in their twenties, a high-quality wig that will last them at least five years.

"It doesn't have split ends, it doesn't shed, it doesn't itch. It's a wig that you can treat like your own hair," she said.

Sarpong needs to mark up her wigs at least 40% to make a profit, and she often checks other websites to ensure her items are priced competitively.

"What people don't understand is that my wigs are an investment, because you'll buy them one time," she said. "A lot of people will buy synthetic wigs for \$200, and they're gone after one wear."

Anure also sells bundles, packages of hair that customers can use to make their own wig; tape-ins, which are longer-lasting extensions; frontals, which cover the front of the scalp; and closures, which cover the back.

"When customers buy those products, they are looking for hair that they'll feel comfortable putting on their head. A lot of bundles will itch or badly irritate your scalp," Sarpong said.

Once a customer places an order, Sarpong ships it directly if the product is on-hand, or she requests it from her vendor. Sometimes she processes orders through Tiger Marshall, a Detroit hairstylist who refers Sarpong to her clients. If a customer places an order through Anure's website, Sarpong will ship the order from her storage location, MEDRX

pharmacy. Her mother owns the pharmacy, and Sarpong prefers to ship orders from there instead of her house, citing space and security purposes.

Wigs are important to Sarpong because every time she wears one or sees other members of the Black community wearing extensions or bundles, she feels “unstoppable.”

“Everyone around us growing up, aunts and sisters and moms, all wore bundles and wigs,” she said.

Sarpong plans to expand Anure with a storefront in Detroit, the hair capital of the world. The store, which Marshall will manage, will exclusively sell Anure products. Having a physical location has been one of Sarpong’s biggest goals and will make Anure stand out from the competition.

“I know there is a big and bright future ahead,” Sarpong said.

In the two months since her 16th birthday, Sarpong has been working on what was once “just a dream” that she used to think about all the time.

Now, she said, “It’s real.”

Student Name: Enbao Cao

Grade: 11

School: St. John's School

Title: Two Worlds

Category: Poetry

Key: Silver Key

Educator:

Weaving past disgruntled drivers, my mother pulled into International Arrivals. A perpetual cloud of smog loomed over the lanes. Though the car protected me from the fumes, I felt like I was suffocating.

“Your father will be out in five minutes,” my mother announced from the front seat.

I wanted to anticipate seeing him in person after three years of hearing his voice on Skype calls, but I felt the polar opposite. Hearing the trunk unlocking, the loading of baggage, and the trunk shutting, my dread only intensified. Exhausted from a 15-hour flight, my father slumped into the front passenger seat. No greeting: it seems like the feeling was mutual.

The drive back home consisted of short-lived conversations between my parents less than a minute each, sparsely distributed over an hour. One such discussion was about my father’s life in Shanghai, the old apartment, the pandemic lockdown, and the government’s mishandling; the city I thought I knew so well seemed like a different world. Judging from their familiarity with the situation, I presumed this summary was indirectly intended for my ears: I was only referred to as ‘你的孩子,’ your child. A wave of resentment washed over my chest. I felt as if I was an unwelcome spirit, and they didn’t dare to mention me by name. Getting off the car, I began to loathe their verbal back-and-forth transferral of ownership, and the idea that a child belonged to one person, not both.

The next morning, I stepped into the car to see that my father was driving instead of my mom. His eyes were laden by darkened shadows, but my observations were interrupted by a question.

“How is school?”

His inquiry seemed simple at first, but I then considered when I should even begin my answer. I first thought about my recent projects, then midterms, and further back to the start of the school year. I realized that my father had been overseas before I completed seventh grade. The countless stories, accomplishments, losses, and experiences compounded onto each other, forming a tangled mess of information that I couldn't begin to share. Breaking the extended silence, I fired off a couple of minuscule, irrelevant events, and he did not press. I instructed him to the high school entrance. Turning into driveway, my father momentarily stopped to admire the limestone bricks that lined the buildings.

“这是不是新造的？” He asked. This is newly built, right?

I was caught so off guard that I had to clarify what he was referring to. He gestured toward the general area of the cafeteria, then towards the main office and the science building.

“Not a single building was built during my time here! Why don't you know anything?” I erupted in anger. The idea that the buildings I walked through for three years were just constructed was absurd. Though it should have made sense, I despised how he lacked a piece of knowledge so central to my life. I heard shouting back, but the roar of blood in my ears muffled my father's words. I exhaled a pent-up sob and shut the car door behind me, like I irreparably severed a connection I once had.

The car ride home was bursting with silence. I imprisoned myself in the bedroom, unable to open my door to the family. When the ceiling lights were turned off and replaced by the glow of a dim lamp, like the welcoming wave of night, I headed down to eat. I was surprised to see bright squares of light shining from a room I almost never used. Hiding in the surrounding darkness, I peered through the entrance to see my father with an intense look, with glasses that reflected the harsh computer screen. He sported a typical business headset, rattling off sentences ever so often. Piecing it together, I realized that his shift had just begun. To maintain a full-time job, he would have to work until the early morning at the least. With remorse, I stumbled across what had caused my father's eye bags. Living with me and my mother, he had to carry out a double life, caring for me during the daytime and tackling a night shift after. I felt my disdain for him subside, bit by bit, as I silently stood watching, reconciling with the situation I now understood.

Student Name: Lucia Flores  
Grade: 10  
School: St. John's School  
Title: Waking Up; A Blessing and A Curse  
Category: Poetry  
Key: Silver Key  
Educator:

Waking up is the most thrilling disappointment.  
I used to dread it.  
The knowledge that I was given another chance.  
That I would keep receiving another try to break the cycle.  
And welcome the morning instead of fearing it.  
Was it too much for me?  
Why?  
Why was I still breathing?  
Why could I not just stop breathing?  
The thought of death terrified me  
Yet I wanted everything to stop.  
If only I could freeze time,  
But time is not in anyone's favor.  
So every night when I closed my eyes and entered the world of dreams  
I prayed that I would never leave.  
And every morning  
When I woke up the smiling of the warm sun  
And the lovely calls of the morning birds  
Disappointment was all I could feel.  
I would curse whatever force refused to take me.  
I knew it was in vain.

Hell some people could only dream to be born into a life like mine.

Yet still the only way I would be able to stay asleep

Would be by giving up.

I don't give up.

I considered it.

But there are fine lines I will not cross,

But that leaves the problem of my prayers unanswered.

So maybe I should pray for something else.

Student Name: Dalia Sandberg

Grade: 10

School: St. John's School

Title: Xenia: From Ancient Greece to My Own Life in Houston

Category: Critical Essay

Key: Silver Key

Educator: Marquita Gill

Maya Angelou once said, "I have found that among its other benefits, giving liberates the soul of the giver" ("Why Giving Really is Better than Receiving"). This quotation encompasses the Greek concept of "xenia," which means hospitality. The Greeks believed everyone should be generous hosts to guests regardless of the visitor's social status. In ancient Greece, xenia was a moral obligation in civilized life, and it was universally accepted as a sign of righteousness (Definitely Greece). In Emily Wilson's translation of Homer's epic *The Odyssey*, xenia is a fundamental virtue, and people viewed hosts who behaved disrespectfully with disdain. Characters in *The Odyssey* who display xenia also show gratitude for everything they have, and each person's level of hospitality reflects his or her values. Similarly, I have gained a sense of gratitude throughout my life by helping others who are less fortunate than I am. Serving food weekly at Food Not Bombs, an organization in which volunteers serve hot meals to the homeless, has allowed me to work in a way that reflects my values. In *The Odyssey* and also in my own life experiences, xenia is the guiding principle which best reflects a person's gratitude toward others.

In *The Odyssey*, there are many examples of hosts who exhibit xenia, prompting not only a sense of gratitude in their guests, but also the hosts' greater sense of appreciation for their good fortune. The first character to demonstrate xenia is Telemachus, Odysseus' son. When Athena disguises herself as Mentis and visits the palace, Telemachus "went straight to meet her at the gate and shook her hand." He makes 'Mentis' feel welcome by offering to "share our dinner, and then tell us what you need" (1.123-125). The act of Telemachus welcoming his guest, a complete stranger, displays his kindness, good nature, and gratitude. As a prince, he knows he must follow the principle of xenia in order to set an excellent example for his people. He takes the time to build friendships with foreigners and wants to share his good fortune with others. 'Mentis' rewards Telemachus for his good behavior when giving helpful advice about bringing his father home.

Another person whose xenia is impactful is Nausicaa, the Phaeacian princess. Odysseus arrives in the land of the Phaeacians after a long journey. He is naked and filthy; still, Nausicaa cautiously welcomes him. She tells her slaves who are apprehensive about talking to Odysseus that "all foreigners and beggars come from Zeus, and any act of kindness is a blessing" (6.207-208). No matter how dirty Odysseus is, Nausicaa helps him,

which Odysseus profoundly appreciates since he has traveled a long way. Xenia is critical not only for hosts, but also for guests, in order to ensure that the gods will reward both parties. Odysseus shows his gratitude to Nausicaa by asking the gods to grant her "heart's desires" (6.180). This exchange of gratitude and support exemplifies how a welcoming host will prompt a guest in need to be grateful. Odysseus needs Nausicaa's help to return to his home, so he is motivated to thank Nausicaa and the Phaeacians for their help.

Another individual who displays profound xenia is Eumaeus, the swineherd. When Odysseus arrives at Eumaeus' home, disguised as a beggar, Eumaeus welcomes him warmly and lets him stay as long as he needs. Eumaeus states, "What I have to give is small, but I will give it gladly" (14.57-58). Eumaeus lives in poor conditions with little money, yet he gives all he has to a beggar he has never even met. Odysseus demonstrates his gratitude by once again blessing his host and asking Zeus and all of the "deathless gods" to reward Eumaeus with his "heart's desire, because you welcomed me so willingly" (14.52-54). Odysseus recognizes how kindhearted and gracious Eumaeus is, and he later rewards Eumaeus by promising marriage and a large house.

Similar to the powerful effect that results when individuals demonstrate xenia, highly consequential results occur for those who lack xenia. For example, the suitors suffer greatly when they exhibit an abject lack of xenia. When Odysseus comes into the palace disguised as a beggar, the suitors are extremely rude to him. Antinous, one prominent suitor, calls Odysseus a "pest" and says he spoils the feast. He then tells Odysseus to "get lost" and calls him a "barefaced beggar" (17.447-450). The contrast between Eumaeus' behavior towards the beggar and the suitors' approach demonstrates the true character of the individuals and foreshadows future negative consequences for the suitors. The Greeks believe that one should always treat strangers with respect and care, no matter how much money they have. Eventually, Odysseus kills the suitors, including Antinous. The suitors suffer terrible deaths since they display no xenia or kindness to others.

Notably, some individuals display xenia at certain times but at other times fail to do so. Despite previous demonstrations of xenia, Odysseus suffers consequences when he exhibits poor xenia as a guest. When he visits the Cyclops, named Polyphemus, he enters Polyphemus' cave without permission. Odysseus eats Polyphemus' cheese and lights a fire, waiting to see if "he would give us gifts" (9.229). When Polyphemus returns, he retorts, "my people think nothing of Zeus with his big scepter, not any god" (9. 274-276). Since Polyphemus is the son of Poseidon, the sea god, he lives under different rules than mortals and does not follow the laws of xenia. When Odysseus selfishly eats the cheese, stays in the cave although he is unwelcome, and expects gifts, he demonstrates his lack of respect for the host. Odysseus' lack of xenia leads to consequences, as Polyphemus eats many of Odysseus' men. Odysseus later realizes his mistake. As he tells the story to the Phaeacians, he admits that leaving before the Cyclops came back "would have been the

better choice" (9. 227). Odysseus eventually learns his lesson, but his initial lack of *xenia* leads to the death of his men.

Similarly, I have experienced my own journey in understanding the concept of *xenia*. One night four years ago, I stayed awake past my bedtime on my phone for hours on end. While scrolling on social media, I found a short video showing a homeless man walking along the street. This man walked by multiple people and pleaded for food, but no one would help him. The people on the road looked disgusted to see him, giving him looks of disdain as if he were a stray dog. As I watched, I felt a rush of sadness pour over me. Then, a kind man brought the homeless man water and food, and the homeless man became overjoyed with emotion. It was such a moving video that I burst into tears. I remember laying in bed that night in the dark for hours thinking about how unfair the world was, and I wanted to do something to help. That video profoundly impacted me and permanently changed my view on hunger and homelessness.

Later that year, through my synagogue, I had an opportunity to begin a volunteer project in honor of my Bat Mitzvah, a coming-of-age ceremony. Because of my experience watching the video and the profound sadness I felt when seeing homeless individuals on the streets of Houston, I wanted to find a project that focused on homelessness and hunger. I found an organization called Food Not Bombs and decided to get involved. Initially, I didn't know anything about the organization. I expected to see a soup kitchen or a shelter similar to the ones in which I had previously volunteered. My father and I prepared a small plate of roasted broccoli and cauliflower in advance. We drove to the downtown site, and the street lights flickered as the sun set over the city.

We parked behind a silver car that belonged to Mark and Veronica Jason, a lovely couple from our synagogue who had introduced me to the organization. I still remember how kind and welcoming they were to me that first night, showing incredible *xenia*. They brought enormous trays of pasta and rice and organized the food line. There were only about seven volunteers that night, including my father, the Jasons, and me.

All the volunteers stood behind white folding tables and served food directly onto the recipients' plates. This was the first time I interacted face-to-face with people in need. Many of these individuals had not eaten all day. Their clothes were dirty and ragged. Some smelled terrible, like fresh cigarette smoke mixed with sweat. They were primarily men, but there were a few women and children. As more people entered the queue, my heart broke even more. I had a complicated feeling inside me—a mixture of gratitude, guilt, and sadness.

My father and I brought one hundred pieces of roasted broccoli and cauliflower, anticipating that this amount would be sufficient. Soon, however, our tray was empty, and it was clear that we had not brought enough vegetables. Although the volunteers had brought many trays of food, they eventually had to ration it out so that each person in line would receive at least some food. It was devastating.

We needed to bring more food, but it was too late. When I got home, I cried into my pillow because I was so sad and angry about all the injustice in the world. It was the first time I had ever stepped outside the bubble of my home and school and seen poverty for the first time. I wanted to go back week after week and help. I needed to go back.

Winter came, and we continued to serve, rain or shine, freezing or sweating. One day I went to volunteer, and it was frigid outside, possibly below freezing. As I served trays of vegetables, my fingers burned from the cold, and my teeth chattered as if I were in Antarctica. I couldn't believe that the men and women we were serving were going to sleep outside on that cold night. I overheard a woman asking where a certain man was. Someone else responded that he had frozen to death the night before.

Since then, I have volunteered there every week, demonstrating *xenia* to people in need, and I have felt grateful for every second. It feels rewarding to make a direct impact in my community.

Every time I am there, I instantly forget my problems. My troubles always seem trivial compared to these individuals' daily hardships. How can I be worried about meaningless arguments with friends or the grade of my math test if others have to worry about having enough to eat or a safe place to sleep?

Throughout the four years I have participated in Food Not Bombs, I have met countless new volunteers from all walks of life who come downtown with a shared purpose. Many of the volunteers themselves are incredibly inspiring to me because they are committed to serving regardless of their own resources. For example, some of them have overcome homelessness themselves. Even before I started Dinner for Downtown, a school CommServe project in which students come to serve with Food Not Bombs, I brought many school friends to volunteer because I felt compelled to share the experience with others. Every single friend I brought with me was moved by what they observed.

This experience has been nothing short of life-changing for me. I've never felt a greater sense of gratitude. I recognize just how fortunate I am not only to have many unique opportunities daily, such as playing tennis or editing the school newspaper, but also to never have to worry about basic needs such as food or housing. Life gets more arduous and complicated every day, but I have learned to step back and appreciate everything. I have also learned to be kind to strangers because you never know what other people are going through.

Two months ago, more than three and a half years after I began volunteering at Food Not Bombs, an unexpected bombshell hit. Food Not Bombs had been an organization with a longstanding tradition of serving the homeless on that street in downtown Houston four days per week. A law in Houston forbids organizations from serving food on the street; however, a former mayor had grandfathered in Food Not Bombs and a few other select groups. Because of this special exception, the organization had served dinner on the same block for over twenty years. But in February of this year, Mayor Turner decided that

Food Not Bombs would no longer be allowed to serve in that location (Ferguson, 2023). The city government placed a notice on the street corner where we volunteer, stating that if Food Not Bombs served there, the volunteers risked violating the law. The Houston Police Department announced that police would issue citations to any volunteers serving food on this street. They designated a new location, but the proposed site was problematic because it was directly in front of a police station, which would discourage the homeless from coming. The leaders and volunteers of Food Not Bombs decided collectively to ignore this new ordinance. We continue to volunteer on the same block. Every week, two police officers arrive in patrol cars. The first night that Food Not Bombs violated the ordinance, hundreds of citizens concerned for the city's homeless came to the street to protest Mayor Turner's actions. At least five video crews from local news channels filmed the entire interaction. Volunteers came with signs with phrases such as "Feeding is not a crime," and protestors gathered around the camera crews. Eventually, the crowd became rowdy, and some began yelling and cursing at the police. It was unclear if some protestors would be arrested. Tensions were high.

Honestly, I was scared of the police. I've always been a rule follower by nature, and I certainly did not want to be arrested. I figured there must be a good reason Mayor Turner changed the law. I was with my mother that night. Neither of us helped to serve because we were too scared of being arrested, but we provided vegetables, utensils, serving spoons, and plates. My mother kept moving closer to the action, as she felt it was a good chance for both of us to see civil disobedience in action for a good cause, but I feared the cameras and police. Later, I came to the conclusion that the change in the law was not justified. Why did we have to move to a location where the homeless would be fearful to show up?

That night I saw what it was like to stand up for my beliefs. I wish I had known I wouldn't be arrested that night, as I would have served food anyway. One week later, once I knew that the police were not arresting the volunteers, I began to serve food again. I have continued every week since.

The police officers have been there long enough that they now know who I am, and they say hello to me each week. They are very friendly to me and to all of the other volunteers, and their presence feels like more of a show at this point. Currently, one volunteer takes a citation each week and eventually has to appear in court. Food Not Bombs has attorneys working pro bono to help defend the organization and, hopefully, to get the citations dropped.

The decision by Mayor Turner to reverse twenty years of good work in which unpaid volunteers help thousands of homeless individuals made me think about him in a different light. To this day, I truly don't know what his motivations are. Many volunteers, even those who otherwise agree with his politics, believe he has political motivations. They guess that his rationale was to remove homeless individuals from public view before the NCAA Men's Basketball Final Four came to town. They suspect that he wanted

the street to look "cleaner" to nationwide viewers who would see the NCAA celebration on TV. I don't know if I will ever understand his motivations, but I am disappointed in the result.

In my opinion, Mayor Turner's actions demonstrate a lack of *xenia* towards homeless men and women in our community. He has refused to sit down and discuss this situation with the leaders of Food Not Bombs, some of whom know him personally and have worked with him in the past. To me, this is the saddest result of his lack of *xenia*; there is no collaboration or cooperation among like-minded people to ultimately help those in need.

Every week for the past four years, I have done my best to show *xenia* by serving the homeless in Downtown Houston. To me, that street where we serve represents a "home," and I exhibit the qualities of both the host and the guest in this space. When I am the host, I welcome the people in need and serve them food, taking care of their needs. Through Food Not Bombs, I have gained a more profound sense of gratitude, understood the importance of helping others, and witnessed how to stand up for my beliefs. Similarly, in *The Odyssey*, multiple hosts such as Telemachus, Eumaeus, and Nausicaa display *xenia* by serving food and helping their guests with every need. Additionally, I am the guest when other volunteers and I use the street to feed the homeless; however, Mayor Turner, the host, shows us a lack of *xenia* by giving citations. Like in *The Odyssey*, when the suitors and Odysseus do not demonstrate *xenia*, Mayor Turner's actions have consequences, ultimately limiting the volunteers' ability to help those in our community. In real life and literature, the host's and the guest's *xenia* eventually impact connections, relationships, and accomplishments. But ultimately, *xenia* is the essence that allows for greater understanding and gratitude.

Student Name: Sebastian Rota  
Grade: 11  
School: The WIDE School  
Title: The Allegory of the Greenhouse  
Category: Science Fiction & Fantasy  
Key: Silver Key  
Educator: Katy Garza

A beam of sunlight weaves through the shutters in my room. It lands on my bed and, over the hours of the morning, it makes its way ever so steadily to my eyes. As I begin to wake up, I try to pull the sheets off of my back, but a fuzzy mass holding it down surprises me.

"Oh, hi Clover. Found another way to get into my room again?" I say, rolling my eyes and then rolling myself over in my bed and finally pushing my blankets off.

Clover meows, hops off of my bed and starts scratching at my door, trying to open it even though it is obvious to me that it is an impossible task for a cat.

"If you would like to sneak into my room, and then sleep on my bed, you'll have to wait for me to get ready before you can leave." I say while opening my dresser. Clover stops scratching and looks at me for a few seconds as I open my blinds and put on some clothes.

I open the door to my room and start walking down the stairs. I make sure to routinely step on the squeaky floorboards, like I do every morning, which my mom has come to recognize. My mother then calls out to me from the kitchen.

"Good morning Daniel! How did you sleep?"

"It was fine, Clover was still quite annoying though. I reckon it's better if she stays in your room." I say, making my way through the living room.

"Maybe you're right!" My mother says as she laughs. I walk over to the kitchen table and sit down as my mother puts a plate of fried fiddlehead ferns and scrambled duck eggs. My mom is a wonderful cook, and I love her food. I think she's so good at it because of her past experience as a chef's servant.

She isn't like some of the other children's mothers I see in the city nearby. Sometimes the other kids make fun of me for having an accursed mother, saying that a person like that is rather unsightly. Other times they make fun of me because she took me in as an orphan. I've tried to ask her why she had become cursed, but she always finds a way to evade the question.

I finish my food and then walk down to the storefront. I pull out my notepad and start looking over the bottles of medicine, writing down whichever ones are starting running low. I'm not really sure where my mother acquired the knowledge to know what all of these different mushrooms and herbs do. She's very good at mixing them together, in the goal of creating tonics and potions of any sorts.

The bottles of plants on the shelves make a rainbow, all perfectly organized by species and use. One of my favorite things to do is run my nose across the semi-circular cabinet, to take in all of the different floral scents in one go. As I begin to finish up, I see a person approaching the storefront through the path out front.

"Mom! Someone's here!" I yell, pointing my face at the stairs in hopes that my voice travels through the house and reaches her.

"Don't worry, let them know I'll be there soon!" My mother yells back down the stairwell.

As the person gets bigger and bigger as they encroach the store front, I recognize them through their pelt coat and woolen scarf.

"Hi Ms. Nobu, how are you?" I said to her from the inside of the store front.

"Hi Daniel! Great to see you again, working at the storefront now?" She says, while a smirk replaces her neutral expression.

"Unfortunately no, just tallying the ingredients I have to forage for today." I explain, flipping over a page on my notebook

"I very much like what you've done with the storefront. The new paint job is wonderfully beautiful!"

Says Ms. Nobu, while admiring the exterior.

I had put together a burlap roof so no one gets wet in the rain, and painted the outdoor wood a vibrant mix of fall colors.

"Thanks Ms. Nobu, I think it looks great too. My mom said she'll be down soon, but I should get into the forest now, I'd like to finish up fast so I can go into town later" I say, with a disappointed tone.

"Well have fun then Daniel, see you later, and have fun in the town!"

I close my notepad,

"Bye Ms. Nobu."

Behind my house is a small trail that leads through a forest, as well as a couple other areas. It's a beautiful place to be in, that's for sure. Tall trees, spindly pine needles, maroon leaves. There's a reason why the autumn season is my favorite, gathering herbs and mushrooms this time of year is almost trivial.

My mom used to go foraging on the days we needed supplies, but after I was old enough I started doing it for her. I don't really enjoy it anymore but I've never told her because I don't want her to feel bad. I really wouldn't want to force her to work when she's weak.

I trudge my way further through, past the giant rib cages and under the fallen trees. All the while, picking the mushrooms I see at the base of the fallen trees, and the berries growing on the spindly vines reaching high. Nearing the end of my walk, I get to my usual stopping point, A gargantuan stone obelisk, not too different to the much smaller ones I see in the earlier portions of my walk. It's rectangular in shape, extends upwards around one-hundred feet, and is made out of gray stone with little imperfections. No one that I've met knows how it got there, and I wonder what its purpose serves. Perhaps it was placed by an ancient group of people that held it in some kind of significance.

It's a great place to end my trips because the vines and moss on the pillar yield a good amount of the herbs I need, that is, if I can reach them.

I pick whatever I'm tall enough to get off of the pillar and turn around so I can start my walk back towards the shop. But, out of the corner of my eye, I spotted a glimmer of something. It looked like a tower, made of cobblestones, with a blue shingled roof the color of a jay's feathers. From where I was standing it wasn't too far away, so I thought I'd make a detour and check it out.

I turned off the path and went past the brush and branch. I looked down for a second to push a small tree out of the way, but when I moved my head back up I suddenly appeared just in front of the tower. It was jarring, and I took a moment to gauge the distance I had seemingly just teleported. Now that I was up close I could see that it was not just a stone tower.

It was a large house, with wet logs making up its walls, and shingles covered in moss creating what you could barely call a roof. Attached to this house was a tall stone tower put together with mortar and rocks, it had some windows placed on it, and a small hole in the roof that looked like it was supposed to be used as some sort of observatory.

Before I neared closer to the building I decided to rotate around it to get a better view of it. After moving around to the buildings side, I saw its door, the hinges rusted and the slats of wood cracked. I could see a light inside, which intrigued me. As I was about to move forward to take a look, I saw what I couldn't believe I had missed before: A large greenhouse attached to the opposite side of the house that the tower was. It looked beautiful, Wrought iron bars covering the seams in the green stained and frosted glass, with a semicircular atrium to end it off.

"This is the jackpot!" I thought excitedly to myself.

“Hopefully it has some substance inside it, this place looks very abandoned though” I said to myself as I began to walk closer to the door.

While this mysterious house is certainly an interesting find, I had never seen it here before. It didn’t have a path moving up to its door, there was no supplies on the outside of it and it was in the middle of a bunch of large trees. It had seemed like it just appeared out of nowhere in the middle of this forest.

As I slowly creaked open the door to the house, it fell off of its hinges rather abruptly, which caused me to jump back. But when I looked up from my sudden scare, I couldn’t believe what I had seen.

A beautiful interior filled with warm light met my eyes. Mahogany tables, velvet chairs, vibrant rugs, plastered walls, white crown molding and a fireplace that seemed to project warmth into my face despite being so far away.

I immediately stepped inside the house after recovering from my abrupt surprise, it felt wonderful being in such a place like this. I had seen houses of similar degree to this in the city, some of the wealthy kids' fathers would show them off to their other rich friends, and I would take peeks inside their doors just to see what it was like.

If it wasn’t for my quick pause to think about my past experiences with wealthy people, I most likely wouldn’t have recognized how strange the inside of this house really was. It was so perfect, nothing out of place, no dust, and it looked as if no one had ever touched it. The most strange thing of all, is that the inside of the house was very obviously larger than the outside.

I stepped through the living room, admiring the expert craftsmanship of the couches and chairs. I thought to myself:

“I should find the entrance to the greenhouse, get whatever’s left on my list, and then head back. I don’t want to end up too late home”

“And besides, I have a very nice story to tell my mother, perhaps I can come back some time later”

I took a stroll through the house to try and find the door or any sort of entrance to the greenhouse, and eventually I noticed a particularly large set of double doors to the left of the living room down a long corridor.

“That must be the entrance to the greenhouse” I thought to myself as I made my way over to it.

The paintings on the walls moved past me quickly as I strolled down the corridor, when I reached the end I put my hand on the door and tried to push it open. The doors were about twice my height, so it was quite apparent that I wasn't going to be able to push it open like that.

I placed my shoulder on the double doors and began to push as hard as I could on them. They creaked loudly as it slowly inched open, I could feel humid and cool air hit my body as I forced my way through to the other side. I paused, took a deep breath, looked around, and saw the most amazing thing I could have ever imagined.

A gargantuan atrium opened up in front of me, filled with plants and trees from all areas and walks of life. Natural sunlight tinted bright green from the frosted glass covering the massive roof fills my eyes as the smells of all the flowers and fruits hanging from the trees enter my nose. A central stone pathway cleaves the greenhouse in two, leading to a staircase and pedestal elevated on a platform covered with the most vibrant and colorful of flowers.

I looked closer at everything, just to try and quantify it in my already overwhelmed mind. I noticed that the roof of the greenhouse had a snaking pattern to it, seemingly resembling the look of the surface of a brain. The wrought iron curving to fit the glass panes was organic too, almost like the entire place itself grew from plants.

As I walked down the stone path, I admired the different species of plants that I saw. Most of the plants I was able to identify, and I was pleasantly surprised by my knowledge so far. But eventually I found some plants that I didn't recognize, and that number quickly grew from some, to hundreds.

At the start of the staircase, I stopped for a second and looked up at the pedestal. On it I could see a medallion. It looked like a small brass circle, engraved with a human brain. While I was peering at it, I heard a noise.

I abruptly turned around, frightened by whatever made the sound. I saw an old man, about median height with gray hair, blue eyes, green overalls fit for gardening, and an old blue cap. I stared at him for a little while as he clipped away at one of the bushes. It was almost obsessive how much he perfected the rounded shape of the bush. When he finally finished cutting every leaf out of place, he moved to the next.

Eventually I decided to confront him, I was going ask him all the burning questions I had about this place's magical properties.

"Excuse me sir, could I talk to you for a bit?" I said, hesitating, rethinking if I should have even inquired in the first place.

"Of course you can Daniel." He said as he placed his clippers and water bucket on the ground.

I quickly thought to myself:

"How in the world could he have possibly known my name!"

But before I could finish that thought he began talking again:

“But I don’t think questions are necessary, you will know everything you need to in time, when you become the keeper.”

I tried to reply, but as the words were about to come out of my mouth, he disintegrated in front of me, wisping away leaving only his clothes and the old blue cap.

“Alright.” I thought to myself.

“This is too much.”

“I’m going to see what’s on that pedestal and get out of this place!”

I ran up the staircase and got to the pedestal, I took one good look at it and grabbed the medallion off of it and turned around, ready to dart out of this mess.

As I took my first step back towards the staircase, the ground began to rumble. But, as suddenly as the rumbling started, it stopped. I looked around to see if anything had changed, but I realized that the medallion was now something else in my hand, a small blue coat. I gazed at it for a while, and eventually I realized what it was.

I fell down to my knees and gripped the coat tight. I squeezed myself together as I began to sob, lying on the floor. I could feel the cold tears running down my face, but I didn’t care, this meant everything to me.

It was a warm summer morning. Taking a stroll through the lumberyard, where the working men made their coin, shaving the wood to be made into planks. I was walking with my father. We always used to take long walks through the forested areas around our house.

We went past the lumberyard, down into the deep forest. Under the fallen trees while crunching on beds of pine needles. I remember being happy, I remember being small. My dad stopped for a second, and sat on a stump. We were talking, while I dug in the dirt below me out of curiosity. We were laughing.

A sudden noise hit my ear, a cry. A group of men came out of the forest. My dad stood up, and told me to stay here as he peered over to look at them.

My dad fell over, and the men turned him over on his belly and dragged him away from me. All the while, I was staring at him. While his empty eyes simply stared back at my little blue coat.

I arose from my position, recollecting myself. The coat, into my bag. The trees and plants around me, wilted and dead. A thick gray smoke filled the top of the greenhouse. I stumbled down the staircase back to the spot where the man left his clothes. I donned them and picked up his watering can and shears.

A new fire was burning in my heart, I was going to do everything in my power to rejuvenate this place.

And so, I did.

I watered the plants, I pruned them and clipped them obsessively, just like the old man had done before me. I fertilized them and gave them everything they could possibly need to grow back to their old strength.

As time went on, the trees became green again, the flowers straight and upright, reaching for the sun with all their strength. The gray smoke dissipated, as the plants ate it up.

The greenhouse was perfect again, I could hear bees humming and butterflies fluttering around me as I carefully set down my watering can. I had grown old, like the man before me. I laid down my little blue coat and old blue cap, yet, as I stood back up I realized. I had become the keeper.

The keeper of the greenhouse, of my mind.

Student Name: Yiran Zhao  
Grade: 9  
School: Village High School  
Title: Extinction  
Category: Science Fiction & Fantasy  
Key: Silver Key  
Educator: Denise Keenaghan

ex·tra·ter·res·tri·al

/ekstrətə'restrēəl/

adjective

of or from outside the earth or its atmosphere.

"searches for extra-terrestrial intelligence"

noun

a hypothetical or fictional being from outer space, especially an intelligent one.

On March 13, 1781, William Herschel discovered Uranus with a telescope. Initially, he believed that it was a star, but its movements later on informed him that it was a planet. The 8 planets of our solar system would later be discovered.

In more modern times, science fiction and astronomy has been integrated as a dominant genre in both science and pop culture. As more information about space was discovered, the topic grew in relevance among the general population. This led to many speculating about extra-terrestrial beings, otherwise known as aliens, and life outside of earth. With global warming and climate issues worsening on Earth, the need to inhabit other planets skyrocketed as well.

Daily Science News Blog  
2011

November 21,

## LIFE ON ANOTHER PLANET?

Earlier this morning, a European-Southern Observatory in Chile discovered a new super earth orbiting a red-dwarf in its habitable zone. The exoplanet has been named Gliese 667 Cc, and has been reported to only be 22 light years away. It has a mass of 4.5 times that of Earth, and has a 28-day orbit.

Many scientists from all over the world have begun to wonder if it is habitable for humans or not. Currently, there is no way to find what the Gliese 667 Cc's surface looks like, which has led some to believe it may have oceans and land similar to Earth's. It may be a stretch, but there is the possibility of life there as well. Who knows? Maybe someday in the future, our descendants will go on a voyage that spans through lifetimes to reach and live on Gliese 667 Cc.

In other news, a group in NASA has also discovered traces of another planet outside of our solar system and its official name is Kepler 22b...

To my fellow netizens,

Lately, there has been a big buzz about new planet discoveries. In my opinion, I think it's suspicious. What's the point of all of this, anyways? It's almost as if it's a government conspiracy. What if it's the plot of District 9, but we are the aliens instead? Or better yet, they found something on the planet and are trying to cover it up? I'm not talking about giant aliens that want to take over the human race. What if small animals or invertebrates

like water bears are living there? If anyone is interested, send me a message on my blog for my full theory.

Posted by Orbie35.\_ 10-12-2011

Decades passed after the discovery of Gliese 667 Cc. The idea of reaching the 22 light-year exoplanet slowly slipped from everyone's minds. However, the organization OrbitX had slowly been researching the possibility for life on Gliese 667 Cc. After countless back-and-forths between the OrbitX and the International Government, they gained permission to send a rover onto Gliese 667 Cc.

[2046-02-15 22:08:47 UTC] The rover is leaving orbit now sir.

[2046-02-15 22:10:56 UTC] Keep updates of the situation. We have spent 22 light years to land this on Gliese 667 Cc. The rover's landing is imperative!

[2046-02-15 23:55:39 UTC] Report on descent.

[2046-02-15 23:58:27 UTC] Heading to safe touchdown speed, cutting parachute in 3, 2, 1

[2046-02-16 00:00:13 UTC] Reaching descent stage, rockets are functioning.

[2046-02-16 00:02:06 UTC] Landing successful. First contact has been made with Gliese 667 Cc.

A prediction of humanities extinction in around 500 years due to irreversible rising global temperatures led to the creation of Project G667Cc, a classified plan to migrate a thousandth of the world's population and abandoning Earth.

Project G667Cc Release Form

Organization: SpacePJSK

Organization: OrbitX

Purpose: Contracted Business Partnership

The organization SpacePJSK, as of 13-06-2048, hereby states that permission is granted for the collaboration of organizations to send astronauts RODERICK FITZGERALD and MINATO POE for landing on Gliese 667 Cc.

The organization OrbitX, as of 13-06-2048, hereby states that permission is granted for the collaboration of organizations to send astronauts NATHANIEL MITCHEL and MARGARET ALCOTT for landing on Gliese 667 Cc.

This agreement is made by both parties to prevent unauthorized disclosure of confidential information. Both parties acknowledge the dangers of prolonged voyaging in space. Both parties acknowledge that there is no guarantee the Rescue Agreement, in which the state takes steps to rescue and recover failed voyagers, will be upheld once the spacecraft has left the Solar System.

Signed,

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RODERICK FITZGERALD

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MINATO POE

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NATHANIEL MITCHEL

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MARGARET ALCOTT

Travel Log

Date: Sunday January 3rd 2060

Current Location: Outer Region of the Solar System

Log: According to Earth's time, today is the 5th anniversary of the Project G667Cc Part 1 launch. One would expect that after 5 years in space, living on a spacecraft would become more bearable, but I still haven't gotten used to it. I doubt any of us have.

I finished exercising in the morning, and wrote it up on the daily mission report. Today is Minato's turn to check on the plants in the greenhouse. It really is incredible that this entire spacecraft is self-sustainable, even if it is only going to be stable long enough for our 22 light-year voyage to the Gliese 667 Cc.

Living with others is very interesting. All of us signed up for this project when we were barely adults. I guess we all sort of hoped that we would be remembered as heroes if we managed to land on the Gliese 667 Cc. After all, we knew we wouldn't ever make it back to Earth again. Not that it matters. All that matters is getting to Gliese 667 Cc and confirming the habitability of it. Earth wasn't good for us anyways.

I heard from the headquarters at SpacePJSK that construction of the spacecraft for the rest of humanity. I still wonder what it will look like with a thousandth of the population crammed into one giant vehicle. After we land and report back, we'll be relieved of our duties. 4 people surviving on a planet until the rest of the world arrives doesn't seem very probable. Even so, I think that we should all stay hopeful for the reinforcements to arrive in time.

Roderick Fitzgerald

Even with the advanced technology of the 2050s, the spacecraft velocity was still much slower than the speed of light. More than 5 decades after Roderick Fitzgerald's 5th anniversary log was written, the 4 astronauts finally landed on Gliese 667 Cc.

The group was met with a vast expanse of rocky, red land, and warm oceans. The sky was decorated with coral streaks and the outlines of Gliese 667 A, B and C. They unloaded their supplies from the G667Cc spacecraft, and began to build a sustainable environment around them. This included shelter from the infrared rays, coverage for the average 32 degrees celsius temperature, and a place for agriculture.

The Gliese 667 Cc orbits its central star once in just 28 days, making one year 28 Earth days long. Just two days after landing and setting up for living on Gliese 667 Cc, the 4 astronauts reported back to OrbitX and SpacePJSK that the area was devoid of hostile entities. They had successfully landed on Gliese 667 Cc, and confirmed it was an inhabitable planet.

Their thoughts on the absence of entities, however, would soon be discovered as incorrect.

Dear Diary,

It's been a little over 2 Earth weeks since landing on the Gliese 667 Cc, and something strange has started to happen.

After we landed, I was put in charge of managing the agriculture. Up until recently, maintaining vegetables hasn't been a big issue. The hardest part is moving them into shade at specific times to make sure they don't wilt.

In the past few days however, I noticed a change. In the beginning, it wasn't very obvious. Just a few small holes on the leaves, or a microscopic trail of soil around the plants, but this soon took a turn for the worse. Entire leaves have begun to disappear, and stems

looked as if they had been snapped off. Now that it has escalated to this degree, I have no choice but to inform the others.

It's a puzzling dilemma. There isn't a lot of wind, and the surveillance cameras haven't shown anything strange. I think there may be something on the Gliese 667 Cc that we have not yet discovered. I am worried that we might be headed towards a shortage of food.

I think I am going to keep the plants somewhere safer for now, until we determine what the threat is.

Margaret Alcott

They were actually carbon-based invertebrates, similar to the Tardigrada or "Water Bear". The species is spread throughout the entire planet, but is very hard to see with the naked eye. However, their microscopic size does not affect their abilities.

meant that they had enough power, if combined, to chew through most materials, if given enough time.

Approximately 4 days after Margaret's diary entry on her worries, the Tardigrada-like aliens chewed through their radio intercoms inside of the space station they had set up. It was a surprise to find that the Gliese 667 Cc inhabitants were capable of such a feat, but this confirmed the theory that there was indeed alien life on the planet.

Without communication to Earth, however, the 4 could not inform the headquarters back on Earth, and slowly, they all died from starvation. The bodies of these "heroes" would

never be found, as in the span of 2 more days, the Tardigrada-like aliens ate through their space suits and into their bones.

#### LOSS OF COMMUNICATION

As of 07-10-2093, 03:27:15 UTC, all radio transmissions with the Project G667Cc members have ceased. The last known contact was at 06-10-2093, 23:12:58 UTC, where astronaut Nathaniel Mitchell signed off for the night. There is currently no given reason for this disruption, and none of the 4 members' safety has been confirmed.

SpacePJSK and OrbitX have put the contract [Project G667Cc Release Form] into effect, and the International Rescue Agreement will not be enforced, as all members were reported to be outside of the Solar System border.

Both SpacePJSK and OrbitX acknowledge that the great migration of Project 667Cc Part 2 will still continue as planned. Based on the previous information supplied by the Project 667Cc Part 1 landing group, the International Government has determined Gliese 667 Cc as an exoplanet fit for human migration.

The Space Cruise launch will occur as planned on 01-01-2094, bringing a thousandth of the chosen population to the Gliese 667 Cc.

Signed,

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RADGE MITCHELL

Chief Executive of Project G667Cc

Only a handful of people back on Earth thought of the sudden loss of communication as a threat. After all, everyone was too busy doing their best to buy into the thousandth of the population that would be able to leave earth. Although more than 10 million people being saved sounds like easy odds to beat, it still meant that out of every 1,000 people on Earth, 999 would die, which scared much of the lower middle class and lower class population.

The government had strict regulations on who was able to get onto the life-saving Space Cruise, a luxury spacecraft built for holding up to 12 million passengers and sending them to Gliese 667 Cc, as well as countless amounts of supplies needed to rebuild society there. Factors like gender, age, occupation, wealth, health and race were all considered. With that said, there was still a "maximum ticket", reserved for those who could afford the 3 billion dollar price of getting a reserved place on the Space Cruise. Scientists who were specialists in astronomy, and top engineers in space organizations were given a free pass. All who could not were to be randomly chosen, or hope they could bribe someone with personal connection to be allowed on the journey.

The entire remainder of society would soon realize that the loss of communication from Project G667Cc Part 1's landing group would become a much bigger issue.

For now, the government took to managing the boarding and lift-off of the Space Cruise.

To anyone out there,

I am one of the people who were left on Earth. As I watched the Space Cruise launch and fly further and further away, all hope that I had for my survival trickled away. I knew that if I had asked, I would have been swiftly accepted onto the spacecraft that was now out of my sight and out of Earth's atmosphere.

Now that I have so poetically described my despair on the certain doom of the remainder of humanity, I have no reserves on spilling my life secrets. This will be my final blog post. Thank you to all of my followers from all of these years.

My name is Louisa Alcott. You might notice that my last name is the same as Margaret Alcott, one of the members of Project G667Cc Part 1. That is because I am her twin sister. Originally, I was going to be the 5th member of the project as well, but I decided to stay behind to spend my life on Earth and take a different path.

I am now a leading scientist and was second in command for the managing headquarters for Project G667Cc's safety. My logic was that if I couldn't protect my twin sister by being on the spacecraft, I would help her on Earth instead.

In 2011, my grandmother, the original creator of the Orbie35\_ account made an offhand post about the Gliese 667 Cc's discovery. Little did she know that it would become a huge part of both my sister and my life. In a way, you could say I inherited her account.

I don't really know why I chose to stay on Earth. I guess a part of me just wanted to die on the same planet I was born on, and not on an exoplanet light years away, or become a random body thrown out to space from the long voyage to the Gliese 667 Cc. There have been rumours about ending all life on Earth via nuclear bombs, instead of having everyone slowly be cooked to death by the Sun. At this point, I do not care how I meet my demise as all of my work on Earth is done, but I have a suspicion that the International Vote will result in the former solution.

I guess we'll see.

I am going to leave you loyal followers with an idea, or an inquiry of some sort. I wonder what we'll look like to the Gliese 667 Cc. In our eyes, we are simply migrating there for

the sake of the survival of humanity, but wouldn't we seem like aliens to it? Put down any theories in the comments below.

Thank you for everything.

Posted by Orbie35\_ 02-01-2094

[Louisa Alcott's body was found 5 days later in a river nearby where she lived. Autopsy reports show that the patient's causes of death were punctured ribs from accelerated impact of water and drowning.]

[2094-12-31 23:30:00 UTC] ALL NUCLEAR WEAPONS DEPLOYED

[2095-01-01 00:00:00 UTC] COLLECTIVE SUICIDE OF HUMANITY COMPLETED. SYSTEM SHUTDOWN INITIATED.

And with that, the chosen remainder of humanity aboard the Space Cruise took the multi-decade long journey to the Gliese 667 Cc, unbeknownst that Earth had become nothing

but dust and ashes, and unknowing of the predicament awaiting them on the Gliese 667 Cc.

Decades passed, until the day of the landing on the Gliese 667 Cc. When each person stepped off the Space Cruise, the same sight greeted them. A vast expanse of rocky, red land, and warm oceans. The coral streaked sky, and the outlines of Gliese 667 A, B and C.

The unloading process began. Bit by bit, buildings were built, roads were paved, and agriculture restarted on land. It all seemed like a dream come true. No one thought anything of the lack of bones from the Project G667Cc Part 1 landing cruise, and just assumed they had decomposed.

The Tardigrada-like life forms that adapted to their environment had come back. To them, it was as if aliens had descended from the sky, and the disturbance of the natural rocky surface of the planet by infrastructure of steel and cement was a threat to their existence. This led to their natural survival instinct to be activated.

On the first day of their attack, all the plants were gone.

On the second day of their attack, the infrastructure was gone.

On the third day of their attack, all of the humans were gone.

Humanity was unable to respond quickly enough to the threat, having no prior knowledge of the life form's existence. And so, they disappeared. To the humans, or their washed-away remnants, the entire existence of people ended in a tragedy.

It was a victory to the Gliese 667 Cc life forms that barely had individual consciousness, for they had successfully defended their homeland from another alien threat.

Student Name: Emma Kay  
Grade: 9  
School: Village High School  
Title: Playing the Piano  
Category: Poetry  
Key: Silver Key  
Educator: Denise Keenaghan

I play the piano on my face.  
I pick at every small mistake  
And every detail I feel is misplaced  
Defacing my own face  
Like a vase in a pottery place  
That is without a case.

I play the piano on my eyes.  
My fingers hit each note as I see my eyes are the wrong size.  
With the right supplies, I can hide all of the lies.  
With each tear, cry and sigh  
I try harder to disguise  
However with each revise,  
I realize my eyes are what I most despise.

I play the piano on my nose.  
As far as it goes,  
I try my best to hide behind shadows  
Yet I suppose I should grow to love  
What I never chose.  
Though not obviously exposed and not usually disclosed,

I compose myself enough to dispose of the tissues after each blow.

I play the piano on my lips.

I sip on rim-stained cups watching as each drop drips.

Researching tips on the best colours and brands of lipsticks

Applying lipgloss while filled with hate for my hip dips

Making sure the lip gloss stays with each practised hair flip.

I play the piano on me.

I wish that I looked like every other she

Picking at each unliked piece

Like loose algae in the sea.

Every note and every key

Played like every unliked piece of me.

Because with every "you look so pretty"

I disagree.

Student Name: Eshani Gale  
Grade: 9  
School: Village High School  
Title: Something Significant  
Category: Personal Essay & Memoir  
Key: Silver Key  
Educator: Denise Keenaghan

My dad is absolutely one to scrutinize the way people act. Though his observations aren't always wrong, after a certain point, a child tends to regard a judgemental parent as just that; a judgemental parent.

However, there is one observation he often makes about the peculiar way people behave that can't help but occupy space in my mind.

This behavior is most noticeable in people gathered around exciting events, such as a vivid display of fireworks, a captivating stage performance, or an eccentric streetside show. Something enthralling, engaging, but short-lived. Something that you won't be able to experience quite the same way in quite the exact moment ever again.

What he finds interesting is how many people are on their phones— recording, taking pictures, whatever. He says that they spend so much time fixated on taking this short, but very real, moment and encapsulating it digitally so that they can share it, monetize it, or at the very least have a less fulfilling, less complete image of the moment that they can always look back on.

This is because what matters to them is not the value of the moment, but the fear that one has when they realize a moment is fleeting.

I believe that one of the most common existential fears that all people have is the fear of loss. Human beings have a natural tendency to hold onto things, be they items, people, or experiences. To live is to be able to fully enjoy that which we are given, that which makes us us, but what we struggle to accept is that the best experiences don't last forever. As good things slip through our hands, our obsession with capturing those things grows, holding onto memories in an attempt to prove that we have them, to prove that we had lived. People who understand that nothing lasts forever become desperate to appreciate what they are given before they lose it, to make something of it. Living life, refusing to let anything go instead of appreciating it, will only harm one's ability to feel connected to anything.

Life is ever changing and ever temporary. That is what makes everything so significant.

Yet it is the fear of letting something go, that is precisely what impairs one's ability to realize the significance of what really is. As someone who has moved countless times throughout my life, who is intimately familiar with that which is temporary, I have grown familiar with this feeling of becoming disconnected from my experiences because of how anxious I am to hold on to them.

I was a little under four years old when I endured my first worldwide trip from Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia, to Louisiana in the United States. It was not my first move, but it was the first one I can remember and the first outside of Asia.

I'm sitting on the floor in my playroom, a reasonably sized, windowless white room carpeted with foam mats and covered in toys— the only room of this house I remember, clinging to a stuffed pony. My mother is crouched over, picking up toys and putting them in boxes.

"Don't pick her up by the tail like that! You're going to hurt her!" I say to her as she quickly scoops up a stuffed orange cat. "Why are you putting them in boxes?"

"Because we need to pack them up to move them easily," She says it gently, but she sounds stressed.

I don't get it. "Oh."

I stop asking questions; Mother seems preoccupied. I continue to watch carefully as she packs up my toys, to ensure she doesn't carelessly hurt any of them again.

"Eshani, do you want to go and pack up your suitcase?" My dad asks me as I surreptitiously try to grab a few dolls from one box and relocate them so that they can be with their friends.

"Why do I need to pack it?" I'm enthusiastic about doing something, but still hopelessly unaware of how any of this was going to work.

"You need to pack it with your most important things so you can have them right when we get off the plane!" My dad is better prepared to deal with a three-year-old at the moment than my mom is. He pulls out a small suitcase and leaves me in my room, returning to repack after I decide that my most important things consist of my favorite shirt, my iPad, seven stuffed animals, and a random pencil.

The packing experience was new to me at the time. The empty, liminal feeling of your house during that final day after packing up was unfamiliar. There were men in our living room, taking apart furniture and taping up boxes. I didn't think much of it; I just thought the tape noises were loud and scary. I remember walking into the deserted apartment and wondering why we were packing up so much stuff to go on vacation. I was too young to

have remembered our previous move, so I didn't understand that we weren't planning on coming back.

"Eshani," my dad approaches me gently. "Do you want to go down into the garden and see your friends?"

I was overjoyed as always to get to go to the common area of our apartment. It featured a beautiful, sunlit garden hanging above the main lobby area, including a fancy little play area that was often busy. I climbed up the stairs to the garden, stumbling as always, and all the more excited to tell my friends all about the new big vacation I was going on. They were all as enthusiastic to hear about it as I was. One of them proposes we play hide and seek tag.

"Eshani will be it because she's going on a fancy vacation!"

And so I hurried my little body through the lush, green, overhanging maze that was the garden, squealing and giggling every time I found someone tucked behind a potted plant or hidden in a corner. I wasn't mourning; I wasn't worried. I was just having fun.

I didn't end up seeing that garden until a decade later when revisiting the city, and I never saw my friends again. I loved that place, and I loved the people. That garden is a location I look back on fondly, even if in my mind it is blurry and incomplete.

I wasn't afraid of letting it all go; I didn't know that I would ever have to. I just wanted to enjoy it, to play hide and seek in the garden and laugh with my friends and enjoy the pretty flowers. And that is why I think I miss that apartment in Mont Kiara so much. In my head, despite my memories there being vague, despite not having lived there long at all, that apartment was my home. I had embraced it, and I had to let it go.

Missing something comes naturally when you are willing to let it go.

I am sitting in the car with my best friend at a gas station somewhere in Lafayette, Louisiana. Her parents are outside, filling the tank and cleaning the windows. It is dark outside, but the gas station is well-lit. We are having a sleepover tonight.

"Did you know," I start to say, before hesitating.

She looks up at me from whatever portable gaming device she is using.

"Know what?" she says in her British accent.

"Well, actually, my parents told me to keep this a secret," I looked out the window to see if her parents were watching. "You can't tell anyone."

"I won't," her response is immediate and half-hearted. "Tell me."

"I'm moving again."

She frowns slightly, but seems mostly unbothered. We are still too young to fully understand the weight of that statement, however, this time around, I am nervous.

She asks a series of questions, not entirely sure what I mean but mostly confused as to why. As far as I'm aware, this particular friend is still in Lafayette to this day. She did not and still does not have quite the experiences to emphasize. Eventually, she gets to one question that I remember quite vividly.

"Will you miss us?"

I don't reply, because I do not know.

"Will you miss me?"

In my experience, all I knew was that missing something was painful.

"Well, did you miss the old place you moved from?"

I was not entirely sure what missing something meant.

"Maybe," there is a question in my voice.

I had confused missing something with regret.

As we grow older and reminisce on our past experiences, nostalgia and regret become familiar emotions. One may feel nostalgic for things as complex and distant as old houses and old friends, but one can also grow nostalgic for the little things. Perhaps it was the beautiful sunset shared with a friend in a cafe over tea or the humble but cozy cabin you spent the night in while in the woods or the exhilarating concert you saw on a whim while it was in town that you never expected to be so good. These big and little memories make up who we are. They are what allow us to live.

And as we grow older and reminisce on those memories we begin to feel a sense of regret, one that comes with the pain of nostalgia. We feel regret that we didn't cherish that sunset or that conversation or that tea enough, that you don't remember quite what that cozy little cabin looked like or felt like, that we didn't know that the thrilling little concert we hadn't expected much from would be one of the best nights of our lives.

Regret makes these experiences in our lives more valuable. Appreciating something while it lasts and being able to let it go is what makes the memory of that thing one worth having, one that is important to you. To miss something is to appreciate something enough to long for it after it's gone. Missing something can be painful. One may try to avoid growing attached to something so that one won't miss it, most try to avoid having to miss something in the first place. But what you only accomplish in refusing to miss something is losing the value of that thing. That is what you will regret the most.

As I grew older my approach to moving shifted from disassociating myself with my environments to desperately trying to encapsulate them in an attempt to sell them as a part of who I was. Even so, I had found that no matter what I did, I was always anticipating my next transfer. I was always more aware of when I was going to get up and leave everything behind than the life I was actually living. I had thought I was doing the right thing in consistently anticipating a move, fighting the temporary nature of my environments by rendering them no longer unexpected.

This behavior resulted in me feeling even more disconnected from my environment. I no longer missed things, not because I was afraid to feel regret, but because I was no longer living in the moment, I was obsessed with the idea of living in the moment. These feelings were particularly heightened when I left Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia, for what would be the third time in my life, to move back to Houston, Texas.

I had spent the previous four years in Malaysia, during which I had ended elementary school, gone through the majority of middle school, experienced COVID, and discovered my passion for music, and so I thought that this must be my home. This time around I was finally going to miss my old house and my old city and my old school because this is where my culture is and this is where my identity is. This time in Kuala Lumpur would have had to have been the memory that made me, me, the memory I would miss, right?

I moved from Malaysia to the US in mid-February of 2022, which, upon writing this, is about a year and two months ago. I was informed that I would be moving in early December beforehand.

It's around three in the afternoon and I had just gotten home from school. I drop my backpack on the couch as I always do and head to the kitchen for a snack when I stumble upon my mother. She is leaning against the counter, on her computer, clearly stressed.

As I make my way to the pantry I attempt to ask, "What's—"

"We're moving again,"

There is a moment of silence.

"To where?" I shove a handful of chips into my mouth. I am not as bothered by the news as I think I should be. We had been in this country for four consecutive years, two years longer than usual. The move was anticipated.

"I'm not sure," she types something into her computer. "Either Houston again, or somewhere in France."

"That's not too bad," I say with my mouth full. "When?"

"We're going to try to do it during your Winter Break," she looks up at me. "So it's easier for you to transition to a new school, but no guarantees."

And so I continue with my daily routine as usual, in my newly decorated room in the house I had been living in for four years, in the city I had been living in for four years, in a country I had been in countless times before when I finally realize; you're moving again. This moment is over. Time to restart.

It will have been the seventh time and yet to this day I still don't know how to feel about it.

I had called up my best friend at the time to tell them the news.

They are quiet for a moment before proposing the idea, "Why don't you come over tomorrow? We can just hang out, you don't need to worry about the move yet." Over the video call they offer a comforting smile. "You have plenty of time."

I declined, telling them that I needed to focus on planning my trip. Planning out how I was going to get together with everyone and appreciate the city before I left.

I spend the next month every weekend getting together with friends and family and going to different restaurants and tourist locations. My primary objective; take as many photos with as many people in as many places as possible. That way, I could miss everything 'properly.'

"Hold on, I want to get a picture of the Twin Towers one last time."

"Let's take a selfie in front of the Pavillion, it looks especially pretty at this time of day."

"Wait, stop, the hills look really pretty from this angle, let me take a photo."

"I want to get a photo of my bedroom. Just so I don't forget it."

I had become exactly what I had wanted to avoid; someone who cannot savor the moment. What was meant to be a month of me relaxing and appreciating my friends and my city and the culture that was meant to be my own turned into one of the most exhausting, stressful months of my life as I struggled to truly appreciate good things by letting them go.

I have always envied the lifestyle of someone who stays in one place. Who knows everything about their town and their home, who has lifelong friends in a school they've been going to their whole life, who knows exactly where their home is and where they are there. Someone who doesn't have to worry so much about being torn away from that home that they truly get to experience it.

However, as time has passed I've learned that, in our modern society, living in the moment, knowing where you belong and where your home is and who you're connected to, is a universal struggle. A large portion of my life has been spent trying to connect with people and cultures and places, trying to find something that I could point to and that I

could say was truly a part of me, that was who I was. After all, having lived all over the world I should have had plenty of homes to call my own, but I have found that when I so desperately want to look to the countries and cultures I used to know and say that they are a deep-rooted, fundamental part of my life, I cannot.

What makes a moment a truly meaningful moment is not its ability to be snapshotted and recorded, saved to a digital archive and displayed in a collection on one's Instagram story, but rather its ability to be understood and appreciated for all that it is before it is gone. What makes a person a truly meaningful person is not their ability to collect things and friends and passport stamps and call themselves exotic, but their ability to take every fleeting experience, stay, and memory for what it is.

I have spent too much of my life going back and forth between place and place and not wanting to let any of it go, and I have found myself estranged from something significant— a country or a culture or a community— to call my own. I believe that my identity is in the little things. The sunsets over tea with friends, the unexpectedly thrilling concerts, the days you could have spent in December at your friends' house simply enjoying their company. Significance comes not in actualizing every big move or big change or a big party in a big city, trying to figure out how to say goodbye and bide your time, but rather in living in the moment.

The little moments.

Student Name: Junhao Cheng  
Grade: 9  
School: Village High School  
Title: Two Worlds  
Category: Personal Essay & Memoir  
Key: Silver Key  
Educator:

### Two Worlds

Body left but soul stays alone  
Bury it in Xiamen  
On the sloping green hills  
and strawberry fields near home

Embark on this journey, reluctant to go  
Leaving memories behind  
playground tag near Yanwu pond  
My childhood – all I know.

Coconut trees - roadside in the Fall  
The ambrosial smell of braised beef  
Fiery sunsets - bliss to the senses  
This is what I recall.

Time builds a wall, Will I find a way through?  
Too many sentiments left unspoken  
But in the recesses, behind the wall  
Three words "just be true".

Assume a new identity in the land of free  
Amidst diverse expressive faces  
Left behind in Xiamen, my confidence  
As I struggle to find the new me.

On the surface, another Asian kid with glasses,  
Observing the world only through a sea of books  
Doing nothing but studying for weeks up weeks  
Solving problems by drawing an axis.

But slowly the real me will emerge  
like a magician who reinvents  
with a secret power sourced from foreign fields  
Insecurities, I will purge.

Two worlds but just one soul  
Uncovered from the green hills of home  
Tarnished a bit from the journey  
But still a powerful gold.

Student Name: Ekaterina Biryukova

Grade: 8

School: Village Middle School

Title: A Delightful Little Adventure

Category: Personal Essay & Memoir

Key: Silver Key

Educator: Elizabeth Foye

Moscow can truthfully be called a city of insane traffic. The 12.68 million population of the Russian capital creates extremely massive and almost never-ending queues of cars. On work days central streets are a prolonged series of "probka" (the Russian nickname for traffic jam), but holidays turn this routine displeasure into a fatal disaster. Exhausted by their tedious jobs, citizens strive to escape urban life by traveling to their cozy country houses. This is why on Saturday thousands of vehicles stream along every possible rural highway in Moscow. CUVs and trucks carry bicycles, bags overloaded with food, and garden instruments - supplies which are necessary for a comfortable outside experience. Upon the weekend's end, city residents hustle with packings and rush to leave - traffic jams overflow the roadways once again. My family and I are no strangers to such journeys, although one car ride has attained a special place in my memory and warms my heart even today.

It was the end of July - the best time to enjoy the outdoors. It was also a long holiday, so Mum, Dad, Grandma and I had decided to take advantage of the opportunity and visit our "dacha" (country house in Russian). Those three days were wonderful, filled with cooperative cooking, atmospheric board games, maintenance of the garden, lasting forest walks and humorous action movies. However, the most vivid part for me was preparing steaks on the outside grill. Discovering it a couple of years ago, the unique, elating and relationship-strengthening entertainment had always been one of my family's favorites. That weekend, as per usual, each person was responsible for a specific task. My grandma, our deservedly proclaimed "Kitchen Queen", was serving the table with her signature dishes: freshly-cut vegetable salad and oven-roasted potatoes; meanwhile, the rest of us were outdoors. The central and most honorable duty of cooking meat was taken on by my dad. Mother and I went back and forth between these two food stations, enthusiastically lending an extra pair of hands to both of them. Although these activities may sound so, they were not a tiresome burden but a true pleasure and relief from problems. Surrounded by the warm serene aura, our eyes observed the beauty of the seemingly flawless nature while our lungs welcomed pure fresh air. Eventually, lunch was ready to eat - we were enveloped in the magnificent flavors of home-made food.

Unfortunately nothing lasts forever. The perfect holiday had come to an end, therefore, we had to load our belongings into the car's trunk and head back to Moscow. Due to the chaotic nature of that departure, or our desire to make the most of the weekend - I cannot

recall clearly now - we ended up departing late, at 8:30 pm. The sun, even though July has the greatest amount of light hours a day, was already set in the middle of the horizon and lighted the small, two-lane road ahead with countless shades of purple, orange, red and pink. Being experts in the car traveling field, we had prepared ourselves for a lengthy ride with a sufficient supply of water bottles and snacks, along with a cheerful mindset. The first half an hour flew by - some simple yet pleasant conversations here and there, a couple of jokes and amusing anecdotes. The sixty minute mark is where things started to get interesting. My dad, being our chauffeur for the night, decided to check the expected arrival time using a navigator. After drawing an annoying, white, spinning circle for about a minute, his machine emitted three routes: one hour eighteen minutes, one hour thirty five minutes, and one hour fifty seven minutes. Having taken various roads in the past, we were well aware of the unpredictability of the first path, however its quickness had made the choice for us - we were desperate to get home as soon as possible.

Music is a loyal companion for all travelers no matter where, how or why they are going. Several years prior to the trip, I had invented a silly though no less exciting game called "Song-Pick". Each person in the vehicle chose a song everybody listened to, then passed the turn to their neighbor. This game had been bringing me so much joy I began asking to play it during every car ride; that Sunday evening wasn't an exception. Mum connected her cell phone to our vehicle's system and made her first selection, starting a new round of "Song-Pick". A fast, energetic song flowed from the car's dynamics, spreading excitement and anticipation to all four passengers. Our compact Mazda CX-5 slowly moved through the endless line of traffic, the transport's headlights illuminating dark sceneries of vast forests and plains. However, we were too preoccupied with music to notice those gloomy views - our loudspeakers were booming with legends of Russian and American rock, tracks we shared a deep love for.

When an hour and a half passed, and we were still far from our destination, everybody became aware that the navigator's predictions had been fallacious. Nonetheless, we did not let ourselves give up, understanding it would not resolve the issue. We kept the mobile on to reference the route and proceeded. This night had already been an eventful one, so we did not think anything would surprise us anymore. It turned out we were very wrong. ... At one point I was looking through the front window, my gaze sliding across the control panel to the cell phone. Its screen was decorated with a message that is only possible to describe as utterly bizarre - the device stated we would reach home faster if we traveled through Saint Petersburg, which is a city located in the opposite direction from Moscow. This situation was so ridiculous that no one could hold themselves still for even a second. The four of us burst into a period of such long and loud collective laughter that I thought each person in the massive traffic jam could not hear anything except this laughter for at least five minutes. At last, having broken through the "probka," Dad pressed the gas pedal to its maximum. We dashed towards the city, being probably as delighted to get out of the constant motionless state as all other drivers from that

highway. We entered the apartment at approximately 11:30 pm. Our typical road trip ended up turning into an entertaining three-hour long journey.

Sadly, a couple of years have passed since that car ride, and I do not recollect much of what happened after the arrival. I can only remember experiencing great relief due to finally getting back home and the combination of exhaustion with positive emotions I felt the following morning. But I have not, or think I ever will forget that drive. It was filled, like a bottle filled to the very top, with joy, love and comfort. The tender but steel-strong family bond had kept us going for all 180 minutes. Every time I get ready for another car trip, I know it is going to be a new adventure - maybe less eventful, yet just as pleasurable and heartwarming.

Student Name: Daniela Rodriguez Gnecco

Grade: 8

School: Village Middle School

Title: An Essay Begins Divided

Category: Personal Essay & Memoir

Key: Silver Key

Educator: Elizabeth Foye

It was merely months ago that I noticed a divide.

divide.

noun.

1. a wide divergence between two groups, typically producing tension or hostility.

Divide was the term I used to describe my friend group in times of disagreement; there were always contradictory cliques. Divide was the term I used to describe the organization of my room; I created sections. Divide was the term I eventually used to describe South America, along with my country of origin, Colombia; I began to do so at the beginning of this school year. Divide was the term I was determined to understand, for a divide is like the explosion of a bursting dam, to create one, a singular crack is enough to make discord rain.

The exhausting summer's heat had remained constant, there was no indication whatsoever that the autumn that greeted the upcoming school year had seeped in. I was a brief two weeks into my curriculum, determined to complete the week's homework. The singular remaining assignment came from Model UN, my chosen elective. I was to create a position paper: an overview about a certain issue from the viewpoint of a chosen nation. Recalling a discussion from my Language Arts class regarding immigration, I chose to compose a piece on ensuring the safety of migrants. I would represent my country, Colombia. My country, that while deemed dangerous, was perfect to me: a wondrous community of people.

I decided to turn to my parents, who'd grown up in Colombia, to learn of Colombia's stance on immigration; they'd seen all the good and all the bad, not the glossed over version of Colombia I'd experienced. I'd expected the well-being of migrants to be a

manageable obstacle, but I did not expect to hear that it was an ongoing crisis. The neighboring country of Venezuela was experiencing an era of extreme poverty and war due to the supreme dictatorship that governed the nation. This led to a surplus of refugees flooding to the Colombian border. These refugees, in turn, were met with hatred. Their Venezuelan nationalities tied them to the be targets of hate crimes, negative prejudices, and diminished opportunities. Migrants from other nations experienced much of the same.

How did the hostile divide between northern nations of South America become so large? How did the discrimination, the xenophobia, of these provinces occur? I began to research.

My eyes engulfed the knowledge I read, connecting the events I learned of like adding links to a chain. My research continued, except now my chain of knowledge was long enough to wrap around an idea; therefore, I began to write. My understanding of Colombia grew, and with that I came to understand my sense of its unity was rather palpable. I learned that merely a few years prior to the beginning of instability in Venezuela, the roles were reversed: Colombians were relocating into Venezuelan territories. They were abhorred by the Venezuelans, and when the tides were turned, the Colombians abhorred them back. I glanced at the screen of my computer. Where I once stared at a blank expanse, I saw countless words lining the document. A bittersweet feeling overwhelmed me, like the final moments of a birthday: a sense of gladness to go on with my life, and a tinge of sadness that the occasion was over. Regardless of my paper coming to a finish, my mind filled with questions. The most prominent was as follows: What started the divide, the tensions, the feuds, between these two nations? That, I would soon discover.

Slight breezes echoed around my head; the wind had a slight flurry. The blinding summer sun was now covered with spots of puffy white cloud, giving way to a clarity of sorts. It'd been one week since my latest writing assignment from Model UN, and I was now tasked with creating a rough draft of an informative essay for Language Arts. I decided to intertwine my previous piece with this one; I would use my knowledge of the "divide" between Colombia and Venezuela to create a new piece. I began to ponder the reasons for the resentment between these two South American nations. Then, it hit me. A memory arose in my mind. I suddenly remembered my old Spanish classes, where my teacher taught me the history of South America. Where I sat every Saturday, rather impatiently, half-listening to the day's lesson. I remembered that my country, along with Venezuela and many others, once united as a singular nation. Gran Colombia: an enormous republic. A unified republic. My mind burned with the need to know how this republic had

given way to today's era of hostility. The gears began to whirl as I started to investigate this topic, and my pencil began to write.

I commenced at the beginning, the formation of Gran Colombia, as to truly understand something, you must understand its roots. Before Gran Colombia, the northern provinces of South America existed as Spanish colonies. Social unrest followed with the prohibition of trade between colonies and other countries; only commerce with Spain was allowed. The economic gains from trade solely with Spain were insufficient to support the colonists' needs. The issue worsened when the Spanish monarch began to raise colonial taxes. This sparked revolts in the colonies. Years passed, tensions grew, until the Spanish were subverted by France. Most colonists rejected French leadership, feeling no patriotism to France. This sparked a revolution. United against Spain, colonial citizens fought in a war for independence, led by revolutionary Simon Bolivar. Five years passed, and the colonies emerged victorious; Spain ceded its territories to South America. The colonists united, and the newly freed provinces of South America became Gran Colombia, appointing the idolized Simon Bolivar as their leader.

united.

adjective.

1. joined together politically, for a common purpose, or by common feelings.

The northern nations of South America, now engulfed in wars and hostility, were once united as a republic. I affixed a plan to expand my new understanding. I knew how unity was established, but I lacked the knowledge of how it was torn apart. I wanted to gain this knowledge to reach a conclusion. The formation of a divide are like cracks in a dam. My mission was to collect every reason, every cause, for which the dam burst. 1) Military officials and average citizens vied for governmental positions, creating contradicting views on how the government should be managed. 2) Struggling regions began to loathe more successful areas. 3) Disputes on whether specific territories were Gran Colombian or Peruvian claims eventually led to the Colombia-Peru War of 1828, aggravating the unease. 4) The beloved leader Simon Bolivar was weakened with a sudden illness, leaving Gran Colombia without a political figurehead. BAM! The dam burst. Countless civilians were sent into a state of indecision with their idolized leader in a state of weakness. Powerful politicians divided the nation into various violent, contradicting groups. These groups opposed each other, soon dividing into separate nations, with Venezuela being the first to separate from the once united republic. Following Venezuela, numerous other sections of Gran Colombia withdrew. The departure of Ecuador and Panama in 1930 marked an end to the era of the enormous republic, leaving Gran Colombia to become

Colombia alone. I suddenly understood that this was the beginning of the divide. This divide, left to expand, had created the feud that characterized South America today. Understanding this divide, quite ironically, created a united front of ideas in my mind, like the web of a spider, with each string supplying a part of the bigger picture.

I deemed it official: autumn had begun. The vibrant, careless summer feeling had faded, giving way to the lucidity of the fall. I glanced at my notebook paper, filled with all that I'd learned, proud to have completed my mission. Suddenly, my mind burned with a newfound realization: An essay begins as a divide, like the contradictory cliques in an argument between friends, like the separated sections created when organizing a room, like the segregated nations of South America. As knowledge is gained, this divide slowly connects, and so ideas begin to form. These ideas develop into a theme, and this theme is elucidated in paragraphs. These paragraphs, in turn, unite as an essay. The call to unite my chosen divide, my prompt to my essay, had grown prosperous, powerful; the answer as to why was simple: I'd been inspired. I'd been invested. I'd been interested. Somewhere along the process, when I gained this sudden interest, I simultaneously began to write. See, the key to writing an essay is to find a subject that brings fascination. When this subject is found, the art of linking together an essay begins.

Student Name: Mirsadig Azimli

Grade: 7

School: Village Middle School

Title: Bob Finding Home

Category: Short Story

Key: Silver Key

Educator:

"I'm bored," said Steve. Steve was a pink eraser.

"Me too," said Bob. Bob was a white pencil with a red heart in the center. Bob and Steve were inside their pencil case waiting for their owner to return home.

Just as he finished his sentence, a boy entered the room. The boy was Mir, Bob's and Steve's owner.

"Hey guys," he said happily. "I have some exciting news."

"What is it?" asked Bob.

"My parents just told me that we are going to America." America? They had never been to America before.

"What happens to all the friends we made in school?" asked Steve.

"We are going to have to say goodbye to all of them," replied Mir.

Bob and Steve couldn't believe that they would now have to leave their human friends.

"I am sure that we are going to make new friends in school," said their owner trying to make Bob and Steve feel better.

After the long trip their whole family was jet lagged. They got a driver and he drove them home. They slept the whole time while driving to their house.

Their house was quite nice and big. Bob felt like America was really going to work out for him.

It was now Monday. The school was enormous. Seven classes went like seven days. Finally the day was over. On their way out of school, Bob was sitting on top of his owner's backpack. The owner walked past a garbage can and slipped. Bob fell in the garbage can and Mir didn't notice. While he was there he met a girl eraser.

"Oh my god. It's a talking pencil! I didn't know that I would stumble upon another one of my kind," she said.

"Hi, I was just thrown in here. My name is Bob."

"My name is Stephanie. I am trying to get out of here."

"Why are you here?" he asked.

"Oh, well, you see, I was just walking around this school and some boys took me and threw me here," she answered. "Do you know how to get out of here?"

Bob thought for a moment, and then he saw a bunch of bottles. "We can stack those bottles on top of each other and then climb our way out," he said.

"That's genius," Stephanie said.

They stacked the bottles and came out of the trash can. Bob ran to where he was sure Mir would be by now.

Mir was not there. Bob entered a class full of nine year olds. Stephanie was behind him. One of them picked them up and threw them out the window. They landed on a tree, and then slid to the ground. While they did so, a gang of erasers drove up to them on motorcycles. Some of them had scars on their face. They were about to attack Bob and Stephanie when a red pencil came to their rescue. They hopped on to his bike because they had no other choice and together they drove away.

It was getting dark and the mysterious pencil parked his bike to talk to Bob and Stephanie.

"Who are you?" Bob asked.

"My name is Ray," he answered.

"Why did you save us?" asked Stephanie.

"I saved y'all cuz I don't leave fellow school supplies behind," Ray answered. "Besides, I can't stand those guys," he added.

"Why?" asked Bob.

"They are a secret organization. They have an entire lab and nobody knows about it. They are planning to create something horrible. They call themselves, the Erasers,"

"Well, that's an unoriginal name," said Stephanie in a joking manner.

"It is lame, for sure, but that doesn't change the fact that they are planning something bad. Whatever it is, it's in their factory," answered Ray.

"Do you know where the factory is?" asked Stephanie.

"I might have an idea where it could be," answered Ray.

"Then lead us there, and we will stop them," said Bob.

Together they drove to the factory. Unfortunately, the Erasers had found them. Three Erasers were after them. Ray was on the highway and he saw the Erasers behind him so he drove in the middle of a big truck and a wall. For a second, his bike touched the wall and made a scraping sound. One of the erasers followed him while the rest tried to go around the truck. Instantly, the truck started moving a little to the right side. That would mean that Bob, Ray and Stephanie would be crushed to a wall.

Ray had a turbo mode on his bike and without any hesitation, he used it. The bike was screeching and there were sparks flying in every direction. At the last second, Ray's bike made it out, but the Eraser behind ended up getting crushed by the truck's force. The second and third erasers were in front of Ray and one of them took out his pencil gun. The gun fired very sharp pencil tips that could nail anyone to the wall. He shot and missed. Then Ray went in the middle of the two Erasers. Now the biker with the gun was on his left, and the biker without the gun was on his right. It was perfect. The eraser on the left fired his gun five times. Ray, Bob and Stephanie all ducked while the driver on the right side got shot by his friend.

The plan had worked. Now there was only one biker left. By now the highway came to an end. There was a railway in front of them. At this moment there was a train coming. Ray had seen this and kept going forward. The Eraser didn't see this, though. By the time they were on the railway. Ray used his turbo mode and instantly hit the eraser's bike making the eraser fall on the train tracks while Ray drove off of the tracks and stopped his bike, watching the Eraser. The Eraser tried to get up, but the train came in an instant, tearing him into little pink bits.

After the previous events Bob and Stephanie were speechless. Finally, they arrived at the factory. They broke their way in. It was white and had two staircases on its sides. In the middle there was a huge picture of a big eraser. The eraser had four huge scars on his face and eyes that were full of anger. The man looked like he had never smiled in his life.

Some time later they reached a room. There was a guard that shot Ray with a sleeping dart. Bob picked Ray up and together they ran away with Stephanie. There was a bridge that they ran through. The guard jumped, shaking the bridge, making Stephanie fall off. Bob caught her and tried to pull her up.

"He is gonna kill you!" she yelled.

"I can't leave you behind," he replied.

The guard was rushing towards Bob. As soon as Bob picked up Stephanie, the guard threw him on the ground. He was about to punch Bob's face in but then his eyes opened widely as he stumbled on the ground. Behind his corpse was Stephanie. She stabbed the guard, saving Bob.

Together they ran away with ray still in their hands. At the end they stumbled across a big empty room.

"Something isn't right," said Bob.

"What is it?" asked Stephanie.

"There are no guards. This feels like a trap."

After Bob said these words, a bunch of guards came out and started spraying Bob and Stephanie with gas to make them fall asleep.

Bob woke up in a prison cell. It was dark and there were cobwebs everywhere. The light instantly turned on as if someone important had walked in the room. Ray and Stephanie were in different cells. By now they were awake. Then a man entered the room. It was the man Bob had seen in a picture.

"Hello my dear friends," he said in a low voice.

"Who are you?" asked Bob.

"Oh, I am the creator of this factory," the man answered. "Ah, my dear Stephanie. How sad it is to see you betray us," the man said.

"What is he talking about?" asked Bob.

"Nothing. It's not important," she told him.

"No Stephanie, tell him the truth or I will do it for you," the scarred man said.

"I used to be a part of "The Erasers" before I met you guys. The reason I was in the school was because I wanted to get a better look at all the places before they were gone. I never wanted to be a part of an evil gang. I tried to leave but I already knew too much. I was a part of them now, until I died. They threatened me. The erasers never broke character when they were with me because they knew that we were going to come to their laboratory. The reason I didn't warn you guys is because I was scared. Now I realize that I made a mistake. I don't want to be with this gang anymore no matter what. I wish I could have made that decision sooner though. I'm sorry."

Bob couldn't believe what he was hearing.

"Well that's a bit too late now. Now it's time you listen to my history," said the madman.

"My name is Mr. Scar. I have created this organization a long time ago. The reason for this organization was to get revenge on people. People have always ruled our lives. They used us as if we were trash. They ruined us for no reason. My solution was this factory. For years our scientists have been working on a huge bomb. This is an eraser bomb. It will erase everything in its path, not the whole world but a huge area. We created a special type of metal to protect us. The metal will surround this whole factory. We will export the bomb away from here and when it explodes everything will be erased except our factory. All because of the metal. For now the bomb is in our factory but soon we will export it.

Well, now that you know everything I will have to kill you. Each of you will die your own way. I cannot enjoy the show so I will leave you guys with my guards. See ya!”

They needed to figure something out. Two guards walked into Stephanie's cell with a small water tank. Two guards were also ready to hang Ray and then two guards entered Bob's room, took a machine and put Bob on a chair. His hands were stuck to a chair with metal. This machine would cut off his face. The saw machine was coming closer to his face every second. While Bob was screaming for his life Ray had beat up both of the guards right when they were about to hang him. He then went to help Stephanie. Ray was getting attacked by one guard. He was choking Ray. Stephanie picked up one of the pencil guns that one of the guards dropped and shot the guard that was choking Ray. There was little time until Bob's face was sawed. Stephanie saw this. She shot at the machine and the guards saving Bob.

“Thank you,” said Bob.

“You saved me and I saved you,” she said.

Bob gave her a smile. Now they were free.

“I might know where the bomb is,” said Ray. “It's probably in the laboratory.”

“How do you know if they have a laboratory?” asked Bob.

“Where else would they make a bomb?” asked Ray.

They ran past every single room, fighting every guard that they saw. They reached a room that had a sign that read Laboratory. Ray broke the door. The room was huge. It was white and there were small bridges. In the middle was a bomb that was going to be exported soon. They saw a small cabin that had small tablets.

“That's probably where they control the bomb,” said Ray.

They were about to run in, but Mr. Scar appeared in front of them.

“Oh, it's you guys again. I didn't think you were going to escape,” he said.]

“Why are you doing this?” asked Bob.

“Look at us. There aren't many pencils or erasers like us. They are non-living. We on the other hand are like people. We are used by these dumb people. We are slaves to them,” answered Mr. Scar.

“That's not true. My owner always saw me as his best friend,” said Bob.

“Well we could be much more than the people make us look like. We are capable of much more. Even your friends don't have anyone to care for them,” said Mr. Scar.

“That doesn't matter. Humans have every right to live peacefully,” said Stephanie.

"Well in that case I must kill all of you myself," replied Mr. Scar.

The madman took a knife and was slowly walking towards them, swooshing it side to side. He jabbed it at Bob in an instant. Luckily, Bob kicked it out of his hand.

"You are more prepared than I thought," said Mr. Scar.

Mr. Scar took out a gun and was about to shoot Ray when Bob threw a metal bar at him. It left a scratch on Mr. Scar's hand and he dropped his weapon. He took out a shuriken and threw it towards a wall that was right behind them.

"You missed," said Stephanie.

"There is a bomb attached to the shuriken," said Mr. Scar.

There was a beeping coming from the shuriken and they all tried to run forward. Bob and Stephanie were far away from the bomb. Ray on the other hand was closer to it. The bomb exploded as Ray plummeted to the ground. Bob could see that half of the back of Ray's body was missing.

"We have to run," said Stephanie.

"We have to carry Ray with us," said Bob.

Bob picked up Ray while Mr. Scar was about to shoot another shuriken but Stephanie pushed him away. Together Stephanie and Bob ran away.

They left the science lab and hid in a small room. There were cameras everywhere. Bob checked the cameras.

"The bomb is close to being exported out of here," said Bob.

"Then I guess we must attack," said Ray.

"You are alive!" said Stephanie.

"Of course. I won't die until we win this battle. We should stop the bomb from going anywhere and then explode it in this factory," said Ray.

"That's a great idea," said Bob.

Together they ran, while Ray limped, to the small cabin area, where they have iPads that control the bomb. They broke the door open and picked up one of the iPads. They left the room but then got surrounded by a bunch of buff guards, guards that they couldn't fight. The guards were blocking every path except the staircase to go up.

"There!" yells Bob.

Together they climbed the staircase and saw a bunch of windows.

"Are you guys thinking what I'm thinking?" asked Stephanie

"Yep," said Ray.

They were about to jump out the window but then-

"STOP!" yelled Mr. Scar. "Your plan is not going to work," he said.

"Why is that?" asked Bob.

"You cannot blow up the bomb with that iPad while it's inside the factory," explained Mr. Scar. "It's been programmed."

"What do we do?" asked Stephanie.

"I know what," said Ray.

Ray jumped at Mr. Scar faster than lightning pushing him back. Mr. Scar pushed Ray away.

"You're weak," said Mr. Scar.

"Well I did accomplish what I wanted," said Ray.

He pulled out four shurikens and one big bomb.

"What are you gonna do with those?" asked Mr. Scar.

"I am gonna end this. We might not be able to explode the bomb through the iPad but we can close the metal barrier. I will explode the bomb with these while my friends jump out the window and close the metal barrier exploding your bomb. I can't explode it with an iPad but I can explode it with the tip of my head and these weapons. I will sacrifice my life to destroy what you have been working on." Said Ray.

"You can't do this," said Bob.

"You guys have to leave while you can," said Ray.

"We can't leave you," said Stephanie.

"I'll see you someday up in the skies," yelled Ray as he jumped down towards the bomb.

The tip of his head was facing the bomb. Guards were shooting their guns at him but each of those bullets just kept hitting the bomb. There was a slow collision as Bob heard Mr. Scar screaming for help. The lights were flashing and everyone was blinded.

"Run!" screamed Bob.

All of the windows shattered and Bob and Stephanie jumped out of one and onto a tree. Bob quickly used the iPad to close the metal barrier seconds before the bomb reached them. The metal barrier slowly opened a minute later. There was no sign of the factory ever being there. Bob and Stephanie were in shock.

"What are we gonna do now?" asked Stephanie.

"Follow me. I know the road home," answered Bob.

They walked to Bob's house still trying to process what just happened.

"Here!" exclaimed Bob. "My house."

"Are you sure I can come in here?"

"Of course."

Their owner Mir opened the door and when he saw Bob his face lit up.

"Bob!" he said. "Where were you?"

"Let's go home and we will tell you over a cup of tea."

Ten minutes later they finished telling their story. Mir was shocked.

"So you want Stephanie to stay with us?"

"Yeah, if it's okay with you," said Bob.

"Of course she can stay with us," said Mir.

Stephanie was relieved.

"We should write a story about this," she said.

"That is a good idea," said Bob.

"What would we call it?" asked Stephanie.

"Maybe we could call it, Bob Finding Home," said Bob.

Student Name: Avery Chen  
Grade: 8  
School: Village Middle School  
Title: Don't Be a Girl  
Category: Personal Essay & Memoir  
Key: Silver Key  
Educator: Elizabeth Foye

As a girl, I was always told that there has to be a man in the house, whether to be the breadwinner, to enforce rules, or maybe even to simply kill a bug. Of course, I believed this (especially the last part), as I was deathly terrified of insects, bugs, arachnids, whatever you would like to call them. Every time there was a bug in my room, I'd grab a piece of tissue paper, fold it up, then stare at the bug (my longest was for an hour and thirty minutes) while I debated whether or not I should kill it. If I killed it, the problem would be gone, but I'd have to kill it, meaning I'd have to (indirectly) touch it. But if I didn't kill it, maybe it would disappear into the walls of my house, and I'd never see it again, or it would crawl all over me while I slept. And so I would stare at it, never letting it leave my sight.

Frequently, I heard the phrase: "bugs are more afraid of you than you of them," and perhaps this was to provide me with some sort of comfort, confidence, or courage, but all it told me was that I was weak – that somehow, despite everyone else being less scared of bugs than bugs are of them, I was still more afraid. With the addition of my brother consistently calling me names such as "weakling," "scaredy-cat," and "chicken," I came to the conclusion that I, along with the majority of women who are scared of bugs, am lesser than men.

Although I am still terrified of bugs, all women being afraid of them is just a stereotypical deception used to provide men with a false sense of superiority. So stereotypical that often times, if one is not afraid of them, they would be praised or maybe even doubted. On the other hand, if a man is afraid, he might be called a coward or told that he will eventually become the "man of the household" – to toughen up or "don't be a girl." But why a girl? Why, in a phrase that basically means don't be a scaredy-cat, is "scaredy-cat" replaced with "girl?" Why does society continuously reinforce the idea that being born a girl automatically makes you generally more afraid? And why are boys "born with" more courage?

To be courageous is so much more than to be brave. Courage acknowledges fear and overcomes it while being mindful of the risks: it is the act of conquering challenges, whereas bravery is to be ignorant, oblivious, or unaware of fears or consequences. With practice, time and time again, courage will be developed. Everyone can learn courage,

including girls, and in fact, it should be expected. How many times do you think girls have been cautioned, warned, or told a simple no, while boys are encouraged to be adventurous and expected to figure things out on their own despite the risks? Society is teaching girls from a young age to adulthood that fear is something they cannot defeat and that it's perfectly okay to miss out and not try something because they're scared. That has most likely caused many girls to miss an opportunity to grow and reach new heights, as boys are pushed to experience new things to strengthen them so that they may provide for their families. So with courage, while fear may be evil, it is a necessary evil in all lives, providing everyone with opportunities to shine. It is a force that must be overcome.

In our world, where girls are dim stars presumed to hide and where boys are the brightest of stars, there is an unequal balance in expectations. Even a dim star, obscured in the highest peaks of a sky full of stars, is still a star if it wants to shine. By believing this, girls will have the courage to take the steps required to shine, and only then will they be able to become something much brighter than a star.

To defeat this biased, sexist mentality that diminishes the courageous spirit inside everyone – every girl – girls must fight with determination, defy this limitation, and tame their fear. They must disregard the disparaging comments that are sure to come their way as they strive to achieve more. And lastly, and most importantly, remember that it is time for the women hidden behind the great men, to realize their worth, as they deserve to be recognized and acknowledged for their accomplishments. They are a girl, I am a girl, and “behind every great man, is an even greater woman.” Embrace the power that comes unapologetically with who we are, even slowly, but surely, one step at a time.

Yesterday, I killed a bug – my time to shine.

Student Name: Angeli Thurlapati

Grade: 8

School: Village Middle School

Title: Exploring Mars and Why it Should Stay a Dream

Category: Critical Essay

Key: Silver Key

Educator: Diane Fanning

The thing most feared by humankind would be extinction. The thing most feared by the rich and powerful would be poverty. The solution to both comes in the form of a rust-hued sphere of iron, nickel, and sulfur that is currently 234 million miles away. Everyone has different reasons to venture out to the Red Planet, but, as thrilling as it may seem, there are two main reasons why we shouldn't go to Mars. From a philosophical standpoint, going to Mars would be trying to unnaturally prolong the existence of our species when we already have a declining planet. That would be comparable to running out of a burning house when we caused the fire. Also, from the realistic aspect, the price tag on exploring Mars would be a tremendous amount of money that would no doubt, be taxing for our nation and many others to provide.

The motivations for countries and wealthy individuals to go to Mars are varied. For nations, the development of modern space technologies not only amplifies their conceptual and mechanical superiority but also increases their standing in the global arena. For example, America landing on the Moon before Russia in the Space Race was a pivotal moment in the Cold War that proved American superiority. Wealthy individuals who are investing in space exploration aim to start breakthroughs that may have progress across various industries. Entrepreneurs see the potential for profitable ventures, from space tourism to capitalizing on the rare minerals. A very profitable venture in Mars would be the selling of Deuterium fuel which can power fusion reactors to create energy. The reason is because Mars has very large natural deposits of this vital substance, with more than the Moon and Earth. The Red Planet is believed to harbor valuable resources, such as rare minerals and water which could be utilized to develop future human colonization. Many nations invest in Mars exploration because there is recognition that space achievements translate into influence and prestige. Being the spearhead of exploration shows industrial capability and leadership, contributing to power. Initiating a presence on Mars could serve as a safety measure, for the prolongment of humankind. Currently our Earth is facing many issues, mainly being global warming, which leads to a loss of biodiversity, air pollution, deforestation, and many other harmful impacts. Idealists see the colonization of Mars as a safeguard for the survival of the human species where humans can escape to have a new beginning.

The exploration of Mars has been a dream, yet there is a reason it should remain that way. Economic challenges stand as overwhelming barriers for human travel to Mars, with the immense financial burden. The innovation of a rocket capable of transporting humans to Mars and the creation of viable habitats requires technological advancements, both of which demand research and development. In a world grappling with issues such as poverty, health inequality, and environmental deterioration, allowing substantial sums to Mars exploration questions priorities. Is it important to travel to a rock 324 million miles away when we have children dying of hunger on our very planet? The capital required for Mars could be reallocated to address global challenges, where positive impacts on humanity are achievable and substantial. Whereas, populating Mars is only a possibility. There will also be many challenges over the funding for this immense project. The government will have to bear a large financial burden with the undertaking of exploration. Federal budget cuts will be inevitable and many important governmental programs such as Medicaid, will be underfunded and under prioritized when many people depend on them. Polarity over whether we should go to Mars or give healthcare is inescapable. The possibility of private companies exploring Mars on their own is simply impossible. They would need to fund R&D (Research and Development), manufacture spacecrafts, and launch a rocket, all of which would require a hefty amount of spending.

In addition, the ethical argument surrounding Mars exploration is rooted in the philosophical concept of anthropocentrism which is where humans believe that we are the one "race" of life that has any real value. The extraction of resources, execution of space traveling technologies, and potential altering efforts on Mars could disrupt its environment. From a philosophical standpoint, affecting a pure, untouched ecosystem, should question the morality of such modifications. Exploration of Mars means the exploitation of the planet's resources. We could possibly be affecting the evolution of life on Mars by inflicting ourselves on it. All species that have ever lived are destined for extinction and by trying to switch planets to have a "fresh start" is just trying to delay the inevitable, extinction. By the constant imagining of the human species as the race deserving of life, forever, we have destroyed other life, forever, creating this horrible imbalance of humanity against all the other races of life. It becomes evident that the ethical challenges are detailed and versatile which is more the reason why humankind should not go to Mars.

Student Name: Naina Sheth

Grade: 8

School: Village Middle School

Title: Forbidden Pages: Unmasking the Harms in Banning Books

Category: Critical Essay

Key: Silver Key

Educator: Elizabeth Foye

Around springtime last year, I overheard a conversation between my mom and her former colleague, whom she worked with as a 5th-grade teacher in Katy ISD. She put the phone on speaker, and a distraught and emotional Mrs. Wagner exclaimed, "You're not going to believe this! They're making us pull Judy Bloom from the shelves!" The administration assembled the staff in the library and presented a list of all the books that teachers were no longer allowed to include in their classroom libraries. These books include *Are You There, God? It's Me, Margaret* by Judy Bloom because of the mention of the menstruation cycle, as well as the picture book *The Paper Bag Princess* by Robert Munsch because of the "portrayal of gender roles" and the word "bum." But why ban books in the first place? In most cases, the book ban comes from a parent's concern about what her child is reading, resulting in the censorship of books. However, banning those books will have many negative implications for our society. For teachers, banning books means getting placed in the middle of controversy, and for students, banning books limits their perspective of themselves and the world around them.

First, banning books creates extra work for teachers, places unneeded limitations on what they can teach, and vilifies them in their communities. Because of the influx of parents complaining, many districts have made it mandatory for all teachers to catalog every single book that they carry in their classrooms. They must also make these catalogs available for parents to see and express concerns about. For example, an English teacher in Kingsport, Tennessee, stated that after teaching for over a decade, she had collected over 500 books and would have to catalog every single one of them (weareteachers). Making a teacher keep track of every book in her classroom library adds far more work for her to accomplish and will diminish the amount of time she has to create quality lesson plans that resonate with her students. Furthermore, an anonymous English teacher stated that their school had them create a website justifying the curriculum they teach. The website had to be open for parents to see, and if they disagreed with anything the teacher had put in the curriculum, the teacher had to change it. Making teachers catalog every book in their libraries and justify their curriculum to parents severely takes away a teacher's motivation to teach, which is unhelpful for the already diminishing population of teachers.

A third-grade teacher in Florida also stated that many churches in the area that she lives in are giving warnings about "what's happening in schools," as if it is a cult to stay away

from. She went on to say that when she introduced herself at a community event, a crowd formed around her, asking if she was one of the teachers who was “brainwashing” children (weareteachers). Brainwashing children!? How does a teacher, the person we entrust to teach us and keep us safe every day, brainwash us? How can books that are created and crafted for the purpose of teaching new perspectives be considered a form of brainwashing? These statements vilify teachers in their own communities and make them look untrustworthy in front of others.

Another English teacher in Utah named Brandy exclaimed, “If a guardian opts out of a book, even a district-approved one, we have to create an entire alternate unit for that child with a different book that has the guardian and district’s approval. This unit must cover the same amount of time, cover all of the exact same standards, and be student-led because we also have to find a place outside the classroom for that student to be while we read or discuss the book they weren’t allowed to read” (weareteachers). If the student is just going to teach themselves the material that their parents want them to learn, it defeats the whole purpose of having a teacher in the classroom. Doing that creates unnecessary restrictions on what teachers can teach to their students and needlessly questions teaching methods that they have spent hours on end perfecting.

In addition, banning books narrows the perspective of a pupil who could have read the book in terms of world view, and even the way they view themselves. Studies show that banning books creates a gap in students’ knowledge because information that would have been provided for them when reading is taken away (maryville pawprints). Also, books are a pivotal tool when learning, and cutting that resource and choosing what gets imputed instead severely narrows a student’s comprehension of current events. For example, in Katy ISD in Texas, teachers were requested to take out all books referring to wars that America took place in. Because of this, students who go to those schools will not be educated on crucial events that laid the foundation of the country we live in. A parent in Prosper sent an email saying that the school should ban the book *Ground Zero* by Alan Gratz because it shows the perspective of an Afghani girl and an American boy (nbcnews). The parent argued that it “depicts American soldiers as callous and evil terrorists” (nbcnews). By taking this book out of a public library, the administration erases all traces of different perspectives for students to find. Also, in Florida, many schools had to remove books referencing slavery (theguardian). We are taught from a young age that there are two sides to every story and to carefully look at both, but how can we examine both sides of a narrative when there is an active effort for it to be concealed? By removing any books that talk about wars and different racial perspectives from bookshelves, the government is choosing what to put into the heads of the children, and the capacity for filling their heads with misconceptions is broadened.

Sherman Alexie, author of *The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian*, was slapped with many bans as soon as his book came out. Based on its content, it is now on the list of the top ten most banned books. This book touches on many issues, including poverty,

alcoholism, cultural barriers, and identity, and stripping it from the shelves made Alexie very upset because it touched on issues he believed were important for readers to know. "Whether it's done by the left or right, it's the first stage toward authoritarian governments," he says. "It's not a small thing. It's the way in which Mao and Stalin started to disappear the intellectuals" (usatoday). Banning books like those fosters a very different narrative of America than the one that allows freedom of speech and press.

Moreover, the act of limiting access to books fosters negative perceptions towards essential subjects that play a vital role in shaping the growth of teenagers. The book *Are You There, God? It's Me, Margaret*, by Judy Bloom was banned because of the mention of the menstrual cycle. The menstrual cycle. Perhaps the most important thing that a girl should learn about herself is banned in her own 5th-grade classroom in an attempt to censor her curiosity. In the book, the main character, Margaret, struggles with the stigma that her period is too late for her friends. This issue is universal for a majority of girls because, for a 5th grader, it is crucial to know that she is not alone if she gets her period before her classmates or long after them. How can this be the reality that we live in? Especially in today's world where everything about ourselves is scrutinized, imagine the disparity of a ten-year-old who hasn't gotten her period yet, struggling to fit in with her girlfriends, and she can't even find a fictional character who is going through the same issues. How can we stand by while the government is actively ceasing education for even the simplest things that every girl should know about?

According to Shirley Robinson, the executive director of the Texas Library Association, "The ability to choose what materials you read or are able to find in a school library is an individual's right here in the U.S., it's important for there to be availability of different types of literature, subjects, genres, and authors representing different viewpoints because we live in a world that has a lot of different viewpoints" (usatoday). By banning those books, instead of embracing students for who they are, we erase any trace of diversity that they possess. When a student steps out into the world, he or she will face many of the same scenarios and perspectives that books teach about, so why not learn sooner than later?

Although there are valid concerns that parents have for their children, once banning books starts, where will it end? Should *The Day the Crayons Quit* by Drew Daywalt really be banned because the beige crayon was considered nude (Houston Chronicle)? How does a crayon even qualify as naked? Where is the line drawn? The costs of banning books already outweigh the benefits by putting teachers in situations they are not willing to be in and molding a student's mindset about the world around them to a replica of their parents, making it easier for misconceptions about the world to fill their heads. Schools should be a safe haven for students and teachers alike, where they can freely explore ideas and expand their knowledge. Removing the restrictions on what can be read can give students the tools they need to succeed in the world and will provide a more beneficial environment for teachers to teach in.



Student Name: Avery Chen  
Grade: 8  
School: Village Middle School  
Title: Kill the Kin  
Category: Science Fiction & Fantasy  
Key: Silver Key  
Educator: Elizabeth Foye

And so, as the 4057 school year came to an end, Elias, satisfied in triumph, stood on stage, bathing in victory, reveling in the cheers. "Congratulations Elias, the first ever Silver blood to become valedictorian in the history of Montera's International School of Tomorrow."

Exhausted, I slump back in my chair and breathe a sigh of relief. After hours of non-stop, hand-cramping writing, I finally finish my story. A wave of exhaustion overwhelms me while I tidy up the papers, knowing I must now create a sequel, when an abrupt sting forms on my finger, and a drop of blood falls on the papers. Suddenly, a red haze fills my head as I struggle to stand. I catch a glimpse of my alarm clock right before the world goes black: May 7, 2078, 8:34 p.m.

"Welcome class of '57, to your senior year at Montera's International School of Tomorrow!" I awaken with a gasp in a strange classroom. Montera? What is happening? My mind is ensnared in an empty chaos, a trance-like state dominating my thoughts. The teacher's words are no longer audible as her voice becomes a constant ring in my ear.

The teacher starts to call attendance when a thought rushes into my head. Who am I? Am I still "me?" I nervously await my turn, lips quivering, hands fidgeting. Still, I hadn't looked up from my desk for fear of being exposed. All of a sudden, I hear a name, causing my head to jolt up.

"Elias?"

"Here. Silver blood," quiet snickers erupt from the room.

"Our only Silver blood in the class so far!" the teacher, Ms. Flamin, announces with a genuine smile. "And last but not least, Leon?"

I freeze. Last? Is it me? But who is Leon? I cannot recall a single character named Leon in my story. A few too many seconds pass as I feel all eyes turn to me. The sun feels all too bright at that moment as if it's casting a spotlight on me, like its sole purpose to exist is to brighten up this single room.

"Here," I finally blurt out.

“And your blood color?”

Once again, I freeze, “Silver...?”

Without hesitation, the once curious faces turn to scowls filled with disgust, their mocking gazes laughing a silent jeer. Ms. Flamin, blind to the discrimination, concludes the attendance with a cheerful demeanor – a sharp contrast to the self-proclaimed “superior” Gold-blooded.

For the rest of the day, my thoughts are crazed with confusion. My head becomes an intricate maze with no map, no end. There is a hint of familiarity as I walk aimlessly through the school I spent hours describing on paper: walls adorned with murals, each stroke telling the tale of its ancient history, towering pillars etched with designs, and wooden doors that reach the sky, reminiscing the countless footsteps of all who had crossed its threshold. Something like satisfaction almost defeats the havoc that conquers me from the moment I arrive here, when a group of students push their way past me. Their disparaging stares, their self-esteem overtly flaunting their Gold blood, pierce through me, but I have much more to worry about than snobby kids born lucky.

Suddenly, like a tidal wave crashing into the shores of my thoughts, a realization along with fear overflows within me. I run to my dorm. The puzzled eyes following my every move become increasingly visible yet invisible as I race down the corridors. As soon as I reach my room, I grab a wad of tissue paper, hold my breath, and cut a small prick on my finger, and there I see it. Red. Red blood. The world starts to spin as I wobble out of the room when it hits me like a strike of lightning: in a world of Silver and Gold bloods, I have Red – the supposedly extinct kind of Red – a crimson color, an apparent anomaly in this realm. Suddenly, the gazes of my classmates feel all too suspicious, and my new reality feels all too real. An enveloping, immense panic comes crashing down on my once-cautious curiosity. My heartbeat races like the frenzied flutter of a hummingbird's wings, but instead of the bird's delicate frame, my heart feels more like a piece of armor tossing around in an earthquake.

After mindlessly stumbling my way through the halls, I finally find closure in a cavernous, breath-taking room: the library. Though once a bustling hub representing Montera's diversity of knowledge, it is now a desolate expanse – the sound of silence fills the eerie room. The air, saturated with the scent of aging papers, overpowered by the heavy smell of wood, provides a needed sense of comfort as the turbulence within me cradles itself into a state of tranquility. The sunlight shines through the stained glass windows, creating a kaleidoscope of colors. Exploring the vast room of wisdom, I examine the colossal shelves that could reach the heavens if stacked upon each other. Its antiquity has a distinctive kind of charm. As my steps echo throughout the labyrinth of aisles that stretch in all directions, I notice a paper amiss amongst the endless rows of books. It has an undeniable allure, dragging me in closer. I pull the ancient paper out, a relic of another age. Its texture is fascinating: delicate, weathered as it bore the weight of centuries on its

fragile self, the edges, frayed. Although its inked contents have slightly faded, I'm able to make out the remains that have overcome history:

"The Tale of Kindred Souls"

Beneath the willow trees, He stood,  
On the cobblestone paths, She stood,  
Two souls, bound by threads,  
Lost, but still, time treads.

Alone, they yearn to be free,  
But alone, they cannot be,  
Two souls entwined, crying a silent plea,  
So they search, so aimlessly.

Till one fateful night,  
Wandering so far,  
Two souls unite,  
Guided by a shining star.

Together, they yearn to be free,  
If together, they can be,  
Two souls aligned, their spirits alight,  
Together, they escape the night.

I flinch when I hear the oak doors abruptly swing open, and the ground rattles as they slam shut. A strange feeling overcomes my body, something almost like guilt, as the footsteps grow louder, closer. I scramble to my feet, stuffing the already-creased paper into my pockets, and hide behind the shelf. As the group of students nears, their voices fill my once quiet sanctuary. With the fear of being caught, I sneak back into my dorm.

Not realizing how much time had passed in the library, I now walk through the halls that seem almost abandoned. The unnecessarily large windows lining the patterned walls no longer illuminate the room but instead display the Earth like an obsidian, a monochromatic serenity – calming, a time of solace, despite my previous turmoil.

I open the door to my dorm, shocked to see Elias sitting at one of the two desks, typing away on his computer, not looking up. As I step in, my lips go dry, and I am paralyzed in place. Directly across from the door is my desk. A desk with a wad of tissue paper. Paper with a drop of blood. Red blood. Glancing at Elias, he continues to pretend as if I had not walked in, which I'm thankful for, but a veil of uneasiness cloaks a shadow over me. I cautiously make my way over to the desk, trying to be as unnoticed as I can – which fails as the sound of creaking wood trails my footsteps, masking the sound of his keyboard. Calmly as I can force myself to be, I pick up the paper and ordinary as can be, toss it into the trash. Still, he does not turn.

Neither of us has spoken a word, though I guess there's also nothing to talk about. He hasn't mentioned the Red blood nor has he given me the slightest glimpse. I start to wonder if he even saw the paper to begin with, but I'm forced to stay silent. As I go to my bed and turn the TV on, it automatically sets to the news channel. Yet again, my heart skips a beat as the reporter announces, "The government warns everyone to be cautious and wary of those around you, as there have been sightings of Red blood in the city of Linae. If you see anything suspicious, we urge you to report it." I immediately shut the TV off as I peek at Elias. The clicks and clacks of his keyboard fade into the silence that had befallen the room. My heartbeat's rhythm starts to go off-track, and a knot in my stomach forms. He has not yet turned, but I feel his stares glaring me down. Nothing. He says nothing. Instead, he swiftly stands up, and my eyes glue shut, held down by invisible chains as my jittery hands grasp each other. They remain closed until I hear the door close, but even after, my heart remains a relentless tempest.

As I shift in my bed, a rustling sound comes from my pocket when I remember the paper I had found in the library. I pull it out, and my eyes dart to the lines:

Alone, they yearn to be free,

But alone, they cannot be

...

If together, they can be,

...

Together, they escape the night.

A realization forms in my mind: I have never been to Linae, meaning that blood couldn't have been mine. There must be another Red blood. But how? There was no Red blood when I wrote my story. I descend into a crazed confusion. My heart tells me to search, yet my body and mind urge me to rest, fatigued after all the stress. Eventually, my bed's cozy embrace seems all too tempting, and I succumb to the latter, drifting off to sleep.

After that, each day, my mind is at war. A war with no end. A war with no winner – a loser no matter the outcome. My focus centers on the gazes and murmurs of others as I await my inevitable confrontation: doom. Their stares monitor my every move, watching, whispering, weaving an impenetrable wall of paranoia. Elias knows. She knows. He knows. They all know. It feels as if their piercing looks have gained an uncanny ability to unearth my deepest secret. A secret that may be worth my life.

As I continue my search for the hidden Red blood, I'm forced to watch Elias excel while I fall behind. I made him, so why am I not him? In my own book, I play the role of an extra.

Over the course of a few weeks, my fear and nervousness soon became envy, and my envy formed a gut-wrenching hatred. I must constantly remind myself to focus on finding the Red blood, or I will be consumed into a dark pit of profound resentment.

One day, while exploring my place of refuge, a safe haven: the library, I come across a hidden stairway buried behind the countless shelves. The air around it is heavy with mystery as if it holds secrets – patiently waiting to be unraveled. Anticipation and excitement course through my veins as I make my way down the staircase. A captivating scenery unfolds before me as I am presented with a cave-like structure filled with torches, deliberately hung up on the wall to flood the room with warm lighting. At least at first glance, it resembles a complex web of winding tunnels, an underground network. My body, brimming with adrenaline, drives me to investigate the possible hidden secrets it may contain. One tunnel in particular holds a compelling atmosphere, one I cannot resist. I make my way down its ancient depths, but as I turn the corner, a girl appears, staring at what seems to be an abnormally large, historic paper hung up on the cave wall.

"Hello?" she jumps, startled by my unexpected comment. The moment she faces me, I'm met with a strange sense of familiarity. She must be the one.

"Oh...Hi. I don't think we should be here..." she looks nervous, scared almost. As I walk closer, the words on the paper become visible when suddenly, more words are written by an invisible force. "Leon walks up to the girl, reading the paper as he closes." My breath becomes short.

"What? What just happened?" I ask though I'm not sure I want to hear the answer.

"I don't know. I found this place earlier, but more words keep forming," she answers, restless, "My name is Maeve. Are you... Leon?"

I'm hesitant to answer, but a feeling deep down within me tells me it's her, "Yes, I am."

As our conversation continues, I find out that Maeve knows all about me. The words on the ancient paper continuously form, describing each and every detail that I'm experiencing, and she admits to being a Red blood just like me. For the first time, I feel a spark lighting up inside me. We can escape is the only thing on my mind.

For the many months following that fateful day, we continue to try over and over and over again, yet nothing works. By now, I long for home. I long for my little sister. I even long for the painful cramps in my hand I would get while writing. Finally, an idea surfaces in my head. If a drop of my blood on my papers is what got me here in the first place, what if it's the way out? I sprint to the library in hopes of finding Maeve. As soon as I see her, I eagerly rant about my idea, and for the rest of that day, we write about our homes. Once we are done, I close my eyes as I prick my finger. I wait. Waiting... Nothing. My hope is gone. I slump back into my chair, defeated. Maeve watches, not even bothering to try hers.

Weeks later, I finally gain the courage to reenter the underground labyrinth. I drag myself down the steep stairs, trudging down the seemingly endless tunnels till I reach the room with the scroll, but this time, enormous letters start to sprawl across the paper filled with my life.

"Kill... the... Kin"

Shivers crawl down my spine as I read the words pasted on the page. My breathing becomes shakier by the second as I try to decipher what it could mean. But deep down in my heart, I knew exactly what it meant. Maeve. I pull out the poem still sitting inside my pocket in hopes of reassurance. Together. We must escape together. I repeat this over and over again knowing the only person to convince is myself. But, as if taunting me, a fear I never knew I had came true as I unfolded the bottom of the paper, revealing new stanzas:

But lies untold,

And trust betrays,

Two souls, a fight unfolds,

Only one, the victor, remains.

Alone, he yearns to be free,

If alone, he can be,

Two souls to escape, but one too few,

One soul, no longer two.

Freedom, he shall have,  
Alone, he shall be,  
One soul gains the win,  
All because he killed the kin.

Reality suspends into an unsettling stillness. Kill the kin? For the first time in this cave, the footsteps from the students above are heard as a hush encapsulates the room.

Suddenly, a voice calls out, "Leon? Are you in here?"

Its Maeve. Instinctively, I reach down and pick up a sharp piece of rock that makes up the cave. The drumming of my heart intensifies as I hear her footsteps grow louder in the echoing structure. There, she turns the corner. I lunge at her. She screams. My body, as if being controlled, ignores her cries for help. I can't stop. I won't stop. A slight smile spreads across my face. Something like exhilaration – thrill perhaps, navigates its way into my blood. It's done. I stop. Just as my heart is about to calm down, I see blood. Maeve's blood. It's Red. But only at first. Slowly but surely, it transforms into the color of the Moon. Silver. Its ethereal essence is an otherworldly sight. But it's Silver. What? Confusion mixes in with my adrenaline, but I have no time to think. In the abnormally quiet moment, filled with just my heavy breaths, the room begins to waltz around me. The ground and the walls distort, blending into each other, swirling, whirling, blurring into disarray. Yes. Yes! It's working. My excitement returns. A subtle surge of nausea creeps into the pit of my stomach, and my vision blurs like a watercolor painting bleeding at its edges. With a thud, I'm forced to the ground as an invisible yet vicious weight presses down on my shoulders. I surrender to the encroaching darkness.

Descending into the universe's arms of oblivion, its transient embrace ends with a startle. My eyes snap open, my breath is short, but I am home. There, the same alarm clock reads May 8, 2078, 5:23 a.m. I sigh in relief, but as I look down. The amount of papers has increased, and there I read, "Leon, in the heat of the moment, commits an irreversible sin. Surrounded by blood, he comes to a realization. Maeve. Once alive, no longer breathing, once Red blood, but Silver overtakes." I stop reading, dumbfounded. As I flip through the pages, it becomes even more clear. This is what I just experienced. Still confused, I jump up to go check on my sister, still sleeping, when a sudden urge takes control of me. I creep up to her bed, the creaking floorboards intensifying the omniscience of her dark room.

"Brother?" she croaks in her raspy, morning voice as she wakes, shifting to look at me.

A sinister grin smears across my face. Only two thoughts are in my mind: I must win. Kill the kin.

Student Name: Rose Scamaroni  
Grade: 8  
School: Village Middle School  
Title: My Land  
Category: Poetry  
Key: Silver Key  
Educator: Diane Fanning

I used to have a joyous life  
In Wallowa my home my right  
I used to run through her meadows and drink from her streams  
Bathing in her gifts without worry, just daydreams  
I used to sneak out at night to gaze at her stars, twinkling and bright  
With Swan Necklace in hand, I was the happiest woman in the land

Then the white soldiers marched into my perfect life  
With lies on their tongues and guns in their hands  
I begged father to fight for our tribe to protect our ancestors' lands,  
But my words were lost in Wallowa's great winds  
With tears in my eyes and sorrow in my heart,  
I gazed longingly at her stars before I was forced to depart

We fled from Wallowa, our home our land  
With hollow stomachs and heavy hearts  
We marched through our misery, and we marched through our pain  
Left with but a string of hope for our hearts to comfort and contain  
This hope kept us warm through the freezing nights  
But the white men continued to pursue us, like moths to a firelight  
Slowly fraying our cotton threads, breaking our spirits, and left with but a strand

We found safety in a valley of brush and willows.  
With their blue coats out of sight, a wave of relief arose  
I danced and sang till my eyes were begging for sleep  
I dreamed of Wallowa, the life that I lost  
But my dreams were left to ashes  
By the deafening screams of my people  
The earth soaked in blood and kindled by flame  
I watched as their bodies lay charred and distorted  
I watched as our children were shot dead like it was a game  
I watched as Mother lay wispy, contorted  
And I watched as the hatred set fire to my heart,  
Causing me endless pain

As the cold bit me and the wind whipped me, we ran  
With Swan Necklace in hand,  
I vowed never to forgive those who passed command  
The command to murder the sleeping women and children  
We ran far from our tribe, far from the white men  
Far from my dead mother's husk  
Finding only shelter in the deepest snow  
and comfort from only each other's warmth at dusk

Awakened by the sound of beating hooves,  
The Assiniboins standing above us in buffalo hoods  
Bearing crafted smiles of deception  
Offering us food and shelter  
Like a mousetrap offers cheese at the center

But with every mask, there are cracks  
Their cracks shone brightly by the malice in their eyes  
Yet with no choice in the matter, we reluctantly obliged  
With full stomachs, new clothes, and safety from the cold  
Swan Necklace and I were ready to depart in hopes of finding Crazy Horse  
The Assiniboins gifted us a horse, and we began our journey  
Looking through the distance, watching an eagle soar so freely so-  
BANG! I felt myself falling, and then it all went black  
Black like scorched earth, black like mother's ashen corpse, black like-

I awakened covered in Swan Necklace's blood  
With a warm hide tent surrounding me  
I wept, and I wept till the sun went to sleep  
With anger cursing through my veins,  
I played the Assiniboin's little games  
Wanting me to be a bride when they murdered the love of my life  
During the ceremony, I gathered all my courage and ran  
I ran for Swan Necklace,  
I ran for Wallowa,  
I ran for my mother,  
I ran for myself  
They tried to come after me, but I was ready  
With my finger on the trigger...  
I suddenly remembered Father's great words  
All the anger vanished from my body, leaving me empty and tired,  
With no one's death, I desired.  
The gun slipped from my frozen hands, as if by command.  
I continued on my journey alone

without Swan Necklace holding my hand.

I am Sound Of Running Feet

I will never again feel the winds of my land.

Student Name: Inaya Rahim  
Grade: 8  
School: Village Middle School  
Title: New York in November  
Category: Personal Essay & Memoir  
Key: Silver Key  
Educator: Elizabeth Foye

New York in November is a city full of excitement, culture, entertainment, and much more. The air is crisp and cool, with light slaps of wind occasionally drifting by and the vibrant colors of autumn mingling with the dazzling lights of the holiday season. Travelers can smell the wonderful aroma of roasted chestnuts, hot chocolate, and pumpkin spice from the street vendors. It makes me feel cozy, comfortable, and cheerful with every step.

New York in November is a paradise for shoppers. Festive holiday shops begin to pop up around the city, making it an enjoyable place for a warm and sweet hot chocolate and a stroll through the delightful twists and turns of New York. The markets are brimming with unique gifts, crafts, and food with beautiful jewelry that sparkles and shines. When I visit, I love to purchase a small souvenir at each Christmas market to remember the city. I enjoy visiting Fifth Avenue where top-tier stores like Chanel, Armani, Cartier, and many more stores that fit every style can be found on each corner. If someone is looking for bargains, they can take advantage of the black Friday sales and get fantastic deals on anything from designer shoes, bags, and accessories to clothing, colognes, and perfumes. Shopping here is unique and almost otherworldly, making travel to 'The City that Never Sleeps' a shopper's dream come true.

New York in November is a wonderful time to experience some of the outdoor activities that the city has to offer. Visitors can take a spectacular fall foliage cruise along the Hudson River where they can see the changing colors of leaves from green to various shades of yellow, orange, red, and brown, creating a stunning contrast with the light blue sky and fluffy white clouds. The colors are bright and vivid, reflecting the temperature of the season. Visitors can also enjoy ice skating at one of the many ice rinks around the city, where they can glide under the stars. In my experience, ice skating in New York is one of the best skating experiences ever because of the environment and surroundings. The smooth ice rinks, the beauty of autumn leaves falling like rain, and the trees shedding their summer clothes make the outdoor experience spectacular, striking, stunning, and something you can't miss.

New York in November is a great time to explore some of the cultural attractions in the city. Travelers can visit world-class museums to admire artworks, artifacts, and exhibits from different eras and regions. They can see the intricate details of ancient sculptures, the vibrant colors of modern paintings, and the realistic models of dinosaurs and animals. One could also catch a Broadway show such as *The Lion King*, *Hamilton*, *Wicked*, and many other well-known musicals. Feeling the emotions, the drama, and the magic of the story, listening to its catchy tunes and powerful vocals, and hearing the applause is truly a spectacular experience. Culture is a tapestry, a mosaic, a melting pot. The beautiful attractions in the 'cultural capital of the world' are priceless experiences that show the importance and value of cultural diversity, and New York is one of the best places to experience it.

New York in November is a City that has something for everyone. The vibrant and lively markets never fail to put a smile on every face. The chilly temperature and the soft crunches and crackles of the crisp leaves fill each heart with holiday happiness. One can see the beauty of the city in their eyes, hear the melody in their ears, smell the fragrance in their nose, taste the flavors in their mouth, and feel the pulse of the city in their veins. It is a City no one will ever forget. New York in November is a City that feels alive.

Student Name: Inaya Rahim

Grade: 8

School: Village Middle School

Title: Open the Gates

Category: Critical Essay

Key: Silver Key

Educator: Elizabeth Foye

“We must think of migrants as human beings who deserve a safe place to live, eat, and drink without human rights violations that arise from open borders. The thought of them being considered as inconveniences promotes a regressive society and creates inequality for all.”

At borders around the world, migrants experience human rights violations, specifically gendered forms of discrimination and abuse, torture and ill-treatment, and many more harmful experiences. Many immigrants never make it across the border. To reduce or even eradicate the dangers that immigrants face at borders, we should globally allow open borders for migration. That is for two main reasons. First, borders create gender and ethnic inequality and cause countless deaths from immigrants trying to cross. Second, opening borders will increase global economic growth and help create economic equality. By opening borders, we create fairness and equality for all.

To start, borders create inequality and cause countless deaths. According to Belinda Dodson from [jstor.org](http://jstor.org), opening borders will create changes in the immigration policy, which will reduce migration gender stereotypes. That is because migration is a deeply gendered process since they rely on the two highly gendered notions of normative migrants. Skilled migrants are normatively masculinized, which discriminates against women who then struggle to be allowed by officials to cross the border. Changes in immigration policy have the power to shape and alter the gendering of migration and can have a dramatic effect on the lives of the families involved.

Additionally, according to [Thoughtco.com](http://Thoughtco.com), societies have consistently benefited from the ethnic diversity resulting from immigration. New immigrants' new ideas, skills, and cultural practices allow societies to grow and thrive. Diversity fuels an environment in which people live and work harmoniously, thus contributing to greater creativity. But the only way to achieve this is to open borders. Lastly, according to John Washington from [thenation.com](http://thenation.com), borders cause the deaths of countless immigrants. Opening borders in the past could have saved more than 60,000 lives. From 2014 to 2019, the number of migrants who have died or gone missing was nearly 60,000 worldwide. If they were allowed free transit so they weren't forced to board unseaworthy ships captained by smugglers, ford dangerous rivers to bypass restrictions or trek across remote deserts to avoid violent

bodyguards, we could eliminate many or even all of these deaths. That shows that opening borders will save countless lives and help achieve equality for all. We must save these people and open borders.

Secondly, opening borders will help the global economy. According to Aisha Dodwell, open borders will increase economic growth and equality. Getting rid of immigration controls could double global GDP because when people move freely, they work, pay taxes, and create jobs. Many migrants send money back to their families in their home country, which could make the world economy more equal. Additionally, according to Adi Gaskell, the global economic gain from open borders amounts to \$100 trillion, making it a win-win for immigrants and the country. That is because people are then able to live and work where they please. Developed countries often have the infrastructure and the resources to enable immigrants to flourish and be more productive than they would be in their homeland while providing a higher standard of living to them. Furthermore, according to John Kennan, open borders will materially benefit workers from underdeveloped countries, including non-migrants, by over \$10,000 a year. Due to this, we can see that open borders are highly beneficial to the world's economy, and by opening borders, we will help both immigrants and the economy.

In conclusion, opening borders is necessary to help the people. By opening borders, we can create gender and ethnic equality, provide a better quality of life for immigrants, and prevent the deaths that occur when immigrants attempt to cross borders. They will increase economic equality and boost the global economy, benefiting everyone. We must put an end to the current struggles and dangers that migrants face at borders by opening them and allowing immigration to happen freely, which provides aid and saves countless lives. It is time to open the gates for freedom and equality.

Student Name: Nazaha Momin

Grade: 8

School: Village Middle School

Title: Reflections

Category: Poetry

Key: Silver Key

Educator: Diane Fanning

Take a look in the mirror, what do you see?

There I see, an infinite depiction of me

Beauty, the pain it's all inside

Emotions, feelings that I try to hide

Keeping the secrets of the untold pasts

A figure from the mirror that always casts

The echos whisper they speak slow

Mirrors sustain more than we know

They copy our tears, laughter, and confusion

Eye to eye the mirror is a strange illusion

Take a look into the mirror once again, what do you see?

There's a picture, ugly or pretty, whatever it may be

A reflection I view that always stays the same

They depict the history, present life, and calls our name

It's an escape, a portal of a timeless dream

I look at my reflection highly embarrassed, I scream

Disgusted, insecure, unhappy, ashamed

A reflective piece that contains myself framed

A painted image that discloses the years

They sit there through the happiness and through the tears

Take a look into the mirror for the third time, what do you see?

Reflecting light that reflects the true me

Within the silver frame uphold the lies

There are many insecurities that I want to revise

It's time to love in this world you have a place

The mirror still stands face-to-face

There are chambers of veiled, masked shapes

Shatter the mirror and the mirror breaks

Escaping yourself, no matter how hard you try

My reflection in the mirror will never die

Changing yourself for someone's satisfaction

The mirror defines your true genuine attraction

You are who you are, It's what you reflect

We can't change that, we are not all perfect

Beneath the glass, there is so much more

There's beauty, a vision you're criticizing yourself for

Take a look in the mirror one last time, what do you see?

I see a beautiful, worthy person gazing back at me

Student Name: Angeli Thurlapati  
Grade: 8  
School: Village Middle School  
Title: Rockport in Spring  
Category: Personal Essay & Memoir  
Key: Silver Key  
Educator: Diane Fanning

The car rumbles as the road morphs from a straight grey pavement into an uneven and cloudy grey road. The murky sky holds the silhouette of a small nondescript town. I gaze out the window, looking at the endless beach.

...

The brisk morning air welcomes me as I step out of the vibrant, stilted Airbnb my family is staying at. I feel a chill hit my legs and arms. I peer towards the coast. A large yard of grass precedes a smooth sand covered beach. I lightly jog through the grassy quad and step onto the beach. Pristine ivory colored sand greets my battered tennis shoes as I stroll towards the shore. I quickly slip off my socks and carefully walk into the crystal clear beryl colored beach, shivering as the icy water laps at my ankles. "Angeli!" My sister calls my name behind me. I look back as my sister tromps towards me wearing with her sweatpants already hiked up. "Can I come into the water with you?" she questions. I would rather have this moment of tranquility to myself but I responded with "sure." She bounds up to my side and we both look out at the smoky, hazy, march sky atop the endless crystal clear water. "It's beautiful." she declares as the storm in her movements calms down. There is a sense of peaceful stillness present in the infinite expanse of sea. Every wave is a constant wall of calm crashing, but every once in a while, a tornado is a pent-up release of emotion.

...

I slowly ramble back to our temporary accommodations as my sister hurries back, the energy behind her movements present again. Their temporary disappearance while admiring the sea was much appreciated, but they never stay away long. My sister is always moving. Whether it's a bounce in her knee or the tapping of her nails, movement is nearly omnipresent in my sister.

I, by contrast am much more slow moving.

...

A washed up lighthouse-red structure held up by beams looms in front of me. I trudge up the stairs in our airbnb while my sister is already at the top. I walk inside the house on stilts as my parents greet me while unpacking.

“Wasn’t the beach so clear?” my father asked.

“Yeah, the beach was so clear and blue and the water and sand had nothing lying in it.” my sister explains while taking out a bagel from the plastic bag before I could even reply.

“The weather is also really nice.” I add.

“This is the best season for the beach since it isn’t too hot.” my mom responded, whisking into the room. I eat a piece of toast before changing and striding back to the beach in my swimsuit.

...

Two days were all I got with Rockport, Texas. There was never enough time with that eternal stretch of transparent azure. Morning, after morning, and evening, after evening. I was used to the chilly bite in the wind every time I went outside. I was used to the idyllic presence haunting every crash of the waves. I was used to the constant, reassuring existence of the beach. I wasn’t used to how little time I had left with it. I didn’t want to get used to it. I came away from that trip sharing a spiritual connection I never knew I had with quaint little beach hidden with a small town.

Student Name: Diya Chaudhri  
 Grade: 7  
 School: Village Middle School  
 Title: School Life  
 Category: Flash Fiction  
 Key: Silver Key  
 Educator: Elizabeth Foye

School Life

TW! Gore

She stabbed him in his lung the moment they were out of sight, his ability to scream gone with the quiet gurgling of his blood filling the opening in his lungs. It was a shame she didn't get to hear the beautiful note of one's scream in an attempt to save one's own life, she thought, pitying herself. The process didn't disturb her in the least due to her former experience in the subject.

She wasn't too sure why her client asked her to kill what seemed to be an innocent dude, but, she thought to herself, She wasn't being paid to ask questions. She disposed of the body swiftly with a sigh. The saying goes something like, "if you do what you love, you'll never work a day in your life"; though for our 15 year old protagonist, it just got boring after 7 years of service. Just as she texted her boss about her success, he responded with a text that changed her life.

~~~~~

"What do you mean I'm going to a fuc- I mean school?!" Nieto yelled into her mic, quickly attempting to hide her use of profanity, despite being a hitman (hitwoman?), she was attempting to be strict with her use of language, especially with her higher ups.

"I expect to see another dollar added to the swear jar," Buck Smith chuckled over the earpiece, knowing about her attempt to clean her vulgar language.

"Yes sir," she responded purely out of duty, her deadpan expression practically bleeding into her voice. As someone who has worked at the same job since she was 8, her peers were more than used to tolerating her immaturity, including her boss. "See ya in a minute" she added before he could respond, and hung up.

He sighed in exasperation from her antics. Entering her into a school was his way of attempting to give her the childhood she missed out on 8 years of.

~

Nieto paused to examine the outside of the building she would be attending nearly every day for the next school year. The place itself was rather unimpressive, with peeling paint, shabby desks, and overall subpar condition, however the part that stood out to her the most was the lack of cameras. "How little do they think of me?" she thought to herself, knowing she was placed there so whatever she does can be swept under the rug.

The lockers were a pain to open due to the years of rust piled atop of one another, though they were surprisingly big, and she had no problem fitting her bag inside. The excitement her coworkers showed in getting her to school on time was a bit irritating, though she was grateful to not have to pack her own bag, as they did it for her. Noticing the lack of students (and sunlight), she checked the time, and lo and behold, it was 5 am. Despite being 3 hours early, she decided to head to her first class listed on the schedule and took a nap at her desk.

She woke up 3 hours later as people began entering the classroom. As she studied the other students, she realized they seemed to fit most of the public school stereotypes she had seen online a few years ago. She found it funny how only about 3 years ago she had a phase where she would have quite literally killed to attend a school, though now that she was there it wasn't exactly what she imagined. In the front row, from left to right, was a nerdy kid, a smart kid, an average student, and a gothic girl, who Nieto was 90% sure she was in some sort of cult. Second row, girl who seemed to be itching to tell the dumbest joke ever heard by humanity and roll around wheezing, a girl still applying an unnecessary amount of makeup and a suffocating amount of perfume, the girl next to her practically mirroring her activity, and to her right, a jock who's body spray rivaled their perfume. Third, and last row, a kid was practically vibrating, 3 bottles of 5 hour energy on her desk with 2 already emptied, next to her was an emo boy, who was blasting some kind of emo rock in his earbuds, loud enough to be heard from Nieto's seat, next to him was a boy who looked like he just wanted to go home, and Nieto, who was very concerned by the increasing amount of 5 hour energies.

~

Nothing noteworthy happened in class, though during the passing period, she bumped into the boy who looked like he wanted to go home, both of them dropping their stuff. Apologizing, Nieto quickly scurried away. She felt... odd... about the way she felt about him. Deciding to explore how she felt, she decided to stalk him, though she gaslit herself into believing it wasn't stalking, just "research". After some examination, she noticed a strong urge to end the people around him. Unsure as to what exactly she was feeling, she decided to research the symptoms, as if it was some sort of illness. After a few hours of research, Nieto found an answer, the term she got for it was,

love.

Student Name: Grant Wintermark

Grade: 8

School: Village Middle School

Title: The Old and the Young

Category: Poetry

Key: Silver Key

Educator: Elizabeth Foye

The Old

Life is hopeless,

I have done all I can

I have the best plan!

Time Goes on

I will retire soon,

Now I spend my time in a saloon

Time Goes On

Death called upon my wife,

My children rarely see me

The Young

Life is exciting,

I can earn that promotion,
My legacy will be an explosion

I just got married to my wife,
I cannot wait for our baby

Time Goes On

It is getting hard to breathe

Hopefully, some will remember me

I am starting to feel old,

I never do anything bold

A New Young

The No Longer Young

I am old now,

My life will soon be over

My life has just begun,

My impact will not be mediocre

Time Goes on

I have finished the grind

Now I can finally rest my mind

Life is long

It feels like an eternal song

Time Goes On

My wife and friends have departed,

My children have become guarded

I just met my future wife,

I cannot wait to share my life

Time Goes On

My life is starting to fade away

Hopefully, my memory lives on

My mind sometimes goes astray

Perhaps I, too, will soon be gone

Student Name: Samuel Holman
Grade: 8
School: Village Middle School
Title: The Quiet Struggle
Category: Poetry
Key: Silver Key
Educator: Elizabeth Foye

Samuel Holman

Diane Fanning

November 30, 2023

The Quiet Struggle

Perhaps one day, I can change

I hate everyone

This life is miserable

Nobody knows, Nobody knows.

Keep quiet, never share

They will break you down,

I will act as if nothing hurts me

Nobody knows, Nobody knows.

Tell someone, maybe, but who?

No, it will only make things worse

One word can't hurt, can it?

Nobody can know, Nobody can know?

I cannot take this

I will speak my mind,
It will take some time,
Somebody knows, Somebody knows.

The pain is away, I must repent
We have a secret, so deeply cherished
I can only hope it will not perish
He knows, He knows.

After six depressing months, I can rest on the seventh.
Nobody has been there for me like you have.
Every second of every day, you are with me.
All I can say is, thank you,
Amen.

Student Name: Ethan Chen

Grade: 8

School: SpiderSmart at Sugar Land

Title: A Beginner's Guide to the Instruments.

Category: Humor

Key: Silver Key

Educator: Sharon Li

Looking for a fine arts credit, even though your drawing of a cat looks more like the abominable snowman? Well look no further! The high school band is just the cult... I mean club to solve that! A P.E. credit and a fine arts credit all rolled into one, with no drawbacks! Well, very little. Ahem, moving on from that, you need to pick an instrument. You don't know what you want to play? Well, I'll enclose a helpful list of each of the instruments and their pros and cons, even the bassoon. (I know what you're thinking. What on God's green Earth is a bassoon?!) Well, don't worry. This is just a free credit, no need to stress, right?

Bassoon: Okay, you probably think this is some exotic kind of plant. Turns out, it's not. It's a big stick with a double reed. When played right it sounds fantastic, but most of the time it just sounds like a freight train. The people that play this are either tiny or roughly the height of a palm tree. The reeds cost twenty-five to fifty dollars apiece, and the bocal can get dented if it drops.

Clarinets

Another woodwind, these make fun of trumpets for being 'egotistical' when clarinetists usually have larger egos than trumpets. They struggle to play the most basic rhythms and keep holding the band up. Everyone makes mistakes, but do we seriously need to repeat two measures seventeen times because they don't understand what triplets are? Oh and also, be prepared to have spit dripping down your leg every single day when you play this, since you only get to swab out your instrument at the end of class.

Bass clarinet

They switched onto the bass clarinet because of one of these reasons.

Case A: They sucked too much at clarinet and decided that if they switched to bass, they'd have a better shot at placing a higher chair. They then found out that even the first chair bass clarinet only plays whole notes for the whole piece.

Case B: They were amazing at the clarinet and the directors basically forced them to switch onto the bass in order to balance out the people from case A.

Case C: They didn't want spit dripping down their legs anymore.

Euphonium

It looks like a tuba after it got shrunk through the drier. It still somehow plays louder than the tubas though.

Tuba

The bell is probably deep enough to fit you inside it. For some reason, the people that play this are usually on the smaller side. It's pretty funny to see someone smaller than their instrument. A guy that's 4'6 and plays the tuba is going to be the butt of a lot of jokes in high school, so consider your height before you pick this.

Flute

This is classified as a woodwind. Why? I have no idea. It's literally a glorified stick of metal with buttons. When they get into their upper register, it sounds so much like a whistle that every dog within twenty kilometers ought to come bounding right over.

Piccolo

This is a smaller flute that's made of wood. Even better at causing first-degree separation of your ears and your head.

Oboes

The reeds cost similar amounts compared to the bassoon reeds. It sounds squeaky, kind of like something out of a cartoon. There are a lot of buttons on this thing, and you don't get to play at any marching shows because no, the school cannot afford to replace a band instrument but can keep donating money to the stupid cheer program.

English Horn

The oboe got tired of sounding like it did. This now sounds like a bumblebee magnified thirty times, then crossed with a pigeon, until they squeak. Then it just sounds like someone is scraping styrofoam against metal. The reeds cost as much as the bassoon ones.

French Horn

They need to stick their hand down the bell so everyone in the band's eardrums don't implode. They can spend thirty minutes to an hour dumping their slides and still have spit stuck inside them. Don't pick it unless you like suffering. At least the people that play this are usually sane. (They did not threaten me with a tennis racket in order for me to say that.) And no, it's not French.

Percussion

A word of caution: DO NOT PICK THIS BECAUSE YOU THINK IT'S GONNA BE EASY! It's not. It takes so long to even figure out how to hit the drum or keys right. Your fingers will

get callused. At one point, you'll probably bruise your hand on a drum. Trust me, it takes more effort (a lot more) than you think it will.

Alto Sax

They play Careless Whispers, even though it's supposed to be played on a Tenor Sax. They are constantly drowned out by the French Horns. Everyone thinks that they're really cool and a lot of people pick this instrument to start off, but barely any of those people have the will to keep practicing. Only pick if you're dedicated; if not, don't play this instrument.

Tenor Sax

They switched only to play Careless Whispers, then realized that they are now forgotten by most of the band.

Bari Sax

They are never heard over the tubas. Their case weighs about as much as a young elephant.

Trumpet

Trumpets. The stereotype: egotistical maniac. At least, most of the time. If you've met a sane trumpeter, consider yourself lucky. They are always laughing at the clarinets because obviously the trumpet is the better instrument keyed in B-flat. (I didn't say that because I play it... did I?) If you pick this, prepare to get picked on by all of your band directors, as well as all your clinicians. Oh and also, even if the weather is really bad and no one else is at the football game, the trumpets have to go and play. Good luck with that, and don't get hit by lightning! On the bright side, it's relatively light.

Trombone

A ripoff of the trumpet. How do you even play with only a slide? The only instrument in the band that has to articulate their chromatic scale. Also known for the wah-wah sound effect (even though it's actually made with a muted trumpet. I know, right?) and for their glissandos. Oh and also, a word of caution: their slides ought to be classified as deadly weapons. They can bruise your back and get your socks wet at the same time! (Ugh, that gosh darned water key...) Anyways, if you pick this instrument, your arm will have serious problems. Playing fast is completely absurd on this instrument. A word of caution: don't provoke a trombonist.

There we go, every instrument in the band summarized in a clear, concise guide. Please come join our cult... I mean band. I hope that this has come in useful, and if it has, please consider donating. We need to raise twelve thousand dollars because our bass clarinet broke his register key yet again, and we can use the excess to abduct... I mean persuade others to join our band army. Ah yes... persuade... Anyways have a nice day!

P.S.

If you don't join band, I will personally hire the piccolo to play their top C as loud as they can right as you're about to fall asleep every single day.

Student Name: Esther Chen
Grade: 11
School: Serenity Art School
Title: American Dream
Category: Science Fiction & Fantasy
Key: Silver Key
Educator: Jing Sun

There is something about the August air- humid, tepid, hesitant.

Like a wary figure with a murky presence wrapped in fog and dust, this atmosphere exhaled charred breaths with a temperamental sigh, thick of a cigarette smell. New York City stared at the muddy floor, although her eyes, misty and distant, seemed to wander aimlessly instead. Her head bent cowardly, and as though the sight had charred her pale skin, she brushed her beautiful fingers against her soft cheek. Beneath her summer coat, a stiff, shocked stature hid quietly.

She and I stood on the wet ground, her wool coat stained with the drizzling rain, heels chipped by the mud. Silently, I held out an umbrella to her, and after deliberating, she took it.

"How lonely New York City is," I quietly laughed.

"How sarcastic," she replied dully.

"I try not to be. People never quite like pessimistic people, after all."

Through the lens of my glasses, I watched her nose wrinkle slightly, her eyesight pinned to the ground. The flutter of snow caught the edge of my vision, and a white dove landed gently on a branch, preening its feathers. The air is muggy and heavy, thick as blood and thin like a ghost, the presence of my older, mature self pressing down the shade of my umbrella.

Don't look, it seemed to say.

The umbrella's weight, I realized, was a little heavier than I thought.

Even so, I remembered its white feathers shining in the leftover rain.

Glancing back to the ground, I broke the silence, "I apologize. I'll try to clean up more thoroughly next time."

Half laugh and grimace tore through her throat, and she bent down. Her manicured nails touched the maggot-infested ground, dusting off the dirt and holding up a thin, pale hand. Soaked in the leftovers of alcohol, the imprint of the can on her pointer, her fingers fold

into it. That cold hand, white as its bone beneath, is stained with ink and carved into the shape of a lonely pen. A pencil indent never left its cold grasp even as it fumbled into the hold awkwardly.

It has a mind and soul of its own, my mother said.

She smiled slowly as though the sun had seeped through her bones and settled in her blood contently. We sat at the end of the porch, our feet dangling over the edge like two lazy cats nestling in summer's embrace. Yet the crack of lychee shells was crisp in her hands, its white fruit tumbling into her palm. They snapped like a whip, sharp as a knife in the air.

"I want to go to America," I said to her.

Looking down, she threw the lychee onto the small pile. Her features are still and quiet, "Why?"

"Because..." I said, "I want to find myself. I want to make a living writing often."

Her sun-kissed fingers reached for another piece, breaking under her nails. She stared at the fragmented shell for a long while; her mouth pressed in a thin, hopeless line. The day had passed without a hurry, the sky windless, and the heat incessant but still. My mother's slumped posture didn't seem to care about time, yet her eyes felt overwhelmed as the thunder of lychee shells clustered on the wooden floor beside her.

A face and smile I couldn't forget wished me farewell, "Call often."

As I wallowed in self-deprecation, New York spoke up, her face blocked by the umbrella.

"How could this two-pence poet know Lady Liberty?" she murmured to my surprise, "yet like I was a treasured friend, she welcomed me inside."

"I remember these lines," she continued softly.

"I didn't think you would."

"On a quiet night, I saw the sway of a lamppost against the ocean waves. I remember the smell of fear and apprehension-" she grimaced slightly, "when someone called out to me."

Ice saturated the ends of my coat, and my hands shivered around the frozen pen. My breaths fell short, dissipating into the wind. Waves crashed into the deck, and salt, like pieces of snow, stuck to my skin. Aboard, a child cried, the men drank, and prayers murmured in a broken chorus. On the edge of dawn, the air was crisp and clear.

"New York City," I thumbed over the page, "will you listen to this small poem of mine?"

"Do you believe in the American Dream?" I asked.

She scoffed at the name with gentle teasing and distaste, "I believe there is nothing you cannot do without a heart, soul, and sweat. The American Dream? No, it is human nature that is capable of the infinite."

"I thought so too- the first time I saw the Statue of Liberty."

There is nothing quite like it, the face of familiarity and strangeness in one imposing nature standing over the city. Nostalgic as the lazy sky and its companions, strange as the birds drifting on the high winds. Familiar as the nights by the balcony, watching the city that never sleeps breathe as the phone rang from the living room.

She set the hand down tenderly and stood, "What made you change your mind?"

I laughed a little, pinching the end of my nose, "A small reason."

"I find it hard to believe."

"You find everything hard to believe. This time, it honestly is simple; I am not a complicated person." I glanced at her, "Humanity, I realized, is not so easily defined as a head, two arms, and some legs."

"Then, what is humanity?"

I thought back quietly, and she waited for me. Rain, pattering onto her shade, drummed a soft, marching beat, and a cold wind rustled against the barren trees. At that moment, I couldn't help but feel the spring saturated the city as the neon lights flickered on, flies whispering by the ear, and rats scurrying by the shuffle of feet.

"A state of being." I almost whispered, "A state of being so easily imbalanced."

It's good, he said, flipping through the pages. It's good, but it's not what we look for.

Cigarette smoke blurred the shape of his eyes as he pushed the paper back.

Young'un these days, he chuckled. His hand slapped down on the table in a friendly manner, you'll regret this in a few years.

I stared at the white sheets and said nothing.

"There were days I felt so humiliated," I told her, "I couldn't pick up the phone. My little nieces had grown up, found loved ones, and had children. My uncle worked diligently in his career, and my mother and father moved to a better home. I-"

I thought of my mother's farewell smile, though she didn't smile at all, "I wished I was a little human like the rest of them. Like Americans as well, working hard for the American dream."

While I wrote poems, Time pulled a chair beside me, flipping through miscellaneous books to pass the hours.

He was a mute man who kept to himself and liked to stare out the window. What he was watching, I could only guess.

Today, he read beside me. My hands shivered in the August heat, sweat falling against the table as I wiped my glasses against a shirt. The smudge of ink scattered across my palm, the page, hints of it on the desk. The article I poured my sweat and soul into didn't seem to have captured it as the minutes passed, leaking a deprived passion into the air instead. My pen lifted into the air, and a cold palm, but soft as powdery snow, lowered my arm. As though the blood rushing inside had hardened into a heavy lead, the pen fell from my grasp, clattering on the floor.

He said nothing; I slumped back against the chair.

I cried and choked like a child, feeling the tears mix into the sweat and fall onto the wooden floor.

The rain watered my lifeless eyes as the body hideously disappeared into nature.

"With time and dedication, your dreams could happen."

With a muted sarcasm, I agreed. One day, maybe I could have.

"Do you now?"

I pulled a cloth from my pocket, clearing the fogged lens, "Since when has my eyesight been bad?"

Her lips pursed as I laughed, "Let dead spirits laugh over the little things. I am a writer-irony and jokes are simply part of who I am."

"Was." Her voice cut through the field, "It's who you were."

"It is who I once was. I am not that dead."

She laughed a little, almost more in courtesy than sincerity.

"There was another one," she whispered, "that I quite liked."

Out of curiosity, I asked the city I had lived in for so long which one she could have liked.

"Soiled socks, a dream, with white wings," she replied, "the bird has flown past long-winded paths and stained signs.

Left on the front porch is a bedridden regret
which I've gifted my shoes."

"I liked that the best." she finished.

For the longest while, the soft rain drowned out our conversation, echoing against the umbrella.

The first thing that day was my landlord and the round anger in his cheeks and deep accent, the spout of his native tongue of a language I struggle to understand. But the talk of money is a universal word. In my starved and grizzly form, a pair of fingers swipe more often at the grease of money than a pen, often at the empty wallet, its leather skin worn and fraught with tears. The second is my aimless travels, a heavy dread pressed against one shoulder. The evening had long disappeared, leaving its footprints behind in shops that shined through the night. A lamplight had sputtered and dimmed, the shop's light seeping into the street. I glanced into its window, displaying an open book.

With some indescribable feelings that arose in my chest, I longed to write another poem.

This time, for whatever reason, she asked me, "Do you believe in the American dream?"

"I believe in hope."

"Hope?"

"There was a bird on the lamppost when the ship pulled into the harbor," I told her, "Without judgment, it gazed over me and judged me."

"And how did it judge you?"

I laughed, closing the umbrella with a click, "I was redeemed."

The tired lines on her face retired briefly, and she seemed to smile ever so softly.

"And now," I continued, "I feel a little more peace with that."

Student Name: Chloe Weng

Grade: 10

School: Margo Writing

Title: Crimson Thread

Category: Poetry

Key: Silver Key

Educator: Margaret Tung

They say you know it when you know it,
but I don't—this is the one thing I can't learn
by studying or reading books or memorizing papers.
I glance at the "hot" boys and girls,
their defined muscles, strong jawlines, dark brows,
their wide eyes, full lips, sun-kissed skin, slim hips,
and I think, Oh, they look attractive,
but it has never crossed my mind before
to be attracted to them,
alluring and charming as my giggling friends
whisper them to be.

Is it a poppy spark that ignites in the
chambers of your heart, illuminating blue-hued veins
in scarlet, swelling into crackling flames
that sear your fingers with a single touch,
smoldering with an uncontrollable fervor?
My rational brain tells me no, the feeling should belong
within the confines of your hypothalamus,
but all the romance stories and love songs
lament about the heart, how it bleeds and shatters

into broken pieces defying physics,
and they must know better than me.

Is it insidious and slow, ice creeping in
and threatening to swallow your intestines,
to cover your flesh in brittle frostbitten skin,
so cold every nerve shuts down and becomes numb
to all sensation but the sensuality of your touch?
But then how can the movie characters confess
with such intensity as their fingertips turn cerulean?
How do their faces disclose that much passion
with each small muscle and tendon?
How do you spin metaphors concrete enough
to define the parameters of such an abstract emotion?

And when I try to foresee my future self,
I envision a career, a living space, a daily routine
with breathtaking clarity,
the outlines sharp and crisp.
Only when I squint can I make out the blurred edges
of a shadowy figure my significant other owns,
or the amorphous burst of cheers and music
and blinding titanium white that must be my wedding,
or even tiny mewling bundles cradled in my arms,
somehow both shapeless and misshapen in my dreams.

Did Yuè Lǎo forget about me when he bound my ankle
with a crimson-colored thread of fate?

Did the mythical old man under the moon,
the god of love and marriage decide that I was not worthy?
Did the fine silk fray and snap, or do I still have yet
to find whoever I was tied to since birth,
to fight for them through our tangling red cord?

That's what they all say, that's what my mother said
with a taut look on her face, reminding me that
I am her daughter, so she knows I will find a man,
his masculine arms enveloping me with the
serenity of security.

I am her daughter, so I am not asexual, aromantic,
or any of the labels I have been mulling over,
whispering aloud just to ponder at the syllables
and whether their shapes match the blankness in my mind.
I am her daughter, so she knows all of my secrets
that not even fate can spell out in bright red.

And if I keep following my length of crimson thread to find
the other unraveling end left unknotted in my hand,
maybe I will learn to keep my head held high,
my lack of feeling given a familiar name
and my identity given a tangible meaning,
in shades of gray and green and violet amidst the rainbow.
Maybe I will learn to love being in love with no one.

Student Name: Lucas Liu
Grade: 9
School: Margo Writing
Title: eSports Are Sports
Category: Critical Essay
Key: Silver Key
Educator: Margaret Tung

Bursts of smoke pump through the floors as the players rush the stadium. Bright lights flash and the crowd stands, shouting their favorite team's name. Some are holding signs supporting players. Other fans are on their feet, whooping and waving flags. As each player is introduced, the JumboTron flashes their faces on the large screen. The players look up, waving to their fans. The smoke fades and the lights dim; there is a moment of concentration as the game is about to begin.

The players take their seats and don their headphones, for this is not a football or basketball game--this is the League Champion Series, one of the biggest eSports events of the year.¹ People unfamiliar with this level of video game playing may be surprised to find out how much video games can resemble established sports. Long considered to be a waste of time, gaming--in particular professional gaming--has gained legitimacy through the umbrella of eSports organizations, and should be classified as a sport.

I. The History of eSports

Electronic sports, more commonly known as eSports have been around for over half of a century and make up a 1.2 billion dollar industry.² Modern eSports consist of teams--made up of coaches and players--with thousands of dollars on the line for each tournament. However, the industry hasn't always been the profitable behemoth it is today; eSports began in 1972 with a handful of friendly contests at Stanford University. The first eSport competition held at Stanford was a 24 player Spacewar! contest: the stakes were bragging rights and a year's subscription to Rolling Stone.³

By the early 1980s, arcades had become popular places for people to gather and compete against each other. Each arcade cabinet had its own "high score list," encouraging players to outscore other arcade goers in their communities to earn a spot at the top of the list. Around this time, Atari decided to host the first national tournament of its popular arcade game Space Invaders, with over 10,000 people competing for a standalone version of Asteroids, another Atari game. Soon, a national scoreboard was developed by Namco and arcade owner Walter Day⁴ for certain arcade games. In 1982, Germany created the "Atari VCS Bundesliga," a project in which various clubs competed to earn the title of "German champion." Over time, many teams were created surrounding Atari Germany--until 1985 when Atari dropped out as an official partner and the project was discontinued.

Players who gathered with friends on private calls paved the way for early eSports clans. As a result of the growing community of gaming enthusiasts, along with the breakdown of regional restrictions via the Internet, the first full leagues were founded in 1988.⁵ In the 1990s personal computers (PCs) began to take the market by storm. As computers became cheaper and more powerful, more people began to play video games from their homes.

Especially in Germany, where teams like the German Clan League (DeLC) cropped up, eSports had begun to rapidly develop. Sixteen hundred people from all over Europe met in Duisburg, Germany, to compete against each other in various video games. However, eSports only became professionalized when South Korea founded the Korean eSports Association, or KeSPA, in 2000.⁶

While countries were making advancements in formalizing teams, the games themselves had begun to evolve as well. In 2000, the PC game Counter-Strike was released by a duo of college students and became one of the first games to use network gaming in teams. The game quickly grew in popularity and for over a decade after its release, was the most successful game in eSports. Although PC games like Counter-Strike had galvanized the industry, console games had also emerged in the competitive gaming scene--most notably, Halo 2, one of the pioneers of console gaming in eSports, was the most popular Xbox game for almost two consecutive years.⁷

In the span of over 50 years, eSports has evolved from just a few college students challenging each other--to people competing from the comforts of their homes--into the international industry we know today. A casual gaming enthusiast who once enjoyed queueing into a game of Team Fortress 2 with friends could now find themselves on a stage, playing the same game with thousands of dollars on the line.

II. Defining Sports

Cambridge Dictionary defines sports as "a game, competition, or activity needing physical effort and skill that is played or done according to rules, for enjoyment and/or as a job."⁸

While sitting at a PC for hours on end does not seem physically taxing, studies have shown that the physical demands of gaming are comparable to that of "real sports."⁹ A study by the German Sports University in Cologne revealed that amounts of a stress hormone, cortisol, in gamers matched the amounts of professional race car drivers. In the same study, researchers found that not only is the stress level the same as competitive racing, but also a competitive eSports player's heartbeat ranges from 160-180 beats per minute, the same heart rate that marathon runners experience during a race.¹⁰

Another study by Stakester, a platform that allows regular people to compete in video games for money, shows that over a two hour gaming session, the average person loses anywhere from 420 to 470 calories--the equivalent of doing 1,000 sit-ups.¹¹ Additionally, in

Trotter et al.'s "The association between esports participation, health and physical activity behaviour," published in the International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health, they found that eSports players are 9-21% more likely to be a healthy weight than the average population.¹²

Although it is true that any person could play a game, it takes consistent months or years of practice and talent to master it. In order to fully master a video game, a player has to excel at the game's movement, timings, strategy, and reflexes. While all games are different, they all have many fundamentals that anyone serious about gaming must learn. For example, a professional at first-person shooter games, such as Valorant, might have trained his aim or knowledge of the map. They might be better at making callouts.¹³ However, someone playing a fighting platformer like Super Smash Bros. would have a better understanding of how to play to accrue advantages and perfect more precise movement. Both of these skill sets would differ greatly from an average player, whose capabilities would be much less refined or practiced than any professional gamer.

III. Defining Athletes

The American Heart Association defines an athlete as "one who participates in an organized team or individual sport that requires systematic training and regular competition against others."¹⁴ Moreover, Bubna et al. define the word "athlete" as "a broader term used to describe athletes across any range of sports...often categorized by their level of eliteness, expertise, and competition level."¹⁵

Eliteness varies from every single game, whether it is a video game or not. Every sport has its tiers, which help to draw the lines between a professional and a competitive player. In gaming, eliteness is characterized by being a player within a prestigious organization or attending a top-level tournament. These tournaments and organizations find players through showings of extreme talent or skill during casual games. For example, content creators who stream their gameplay and demonstrate exceptional skill in a game could be picked up by an organization. Alternatively, a player might apply and run scrimmages with a team, letting the team decide if the player is a good fit. In eSports, a scrimmage is a simulated game, usually without stakes, that is meant as practice for a team.

Expertise in gaming can vary depending on the game. In the same way that a basketball player would need a different set of skills than a football player, every eSport involves a unique area of expertise. In a first-person tactical shooter like Tom Clancy's Rainbow Six Siege, a professional would have a solid understanding of optimizing gunfights and sprint discipline. Meanwhile, professionals in a multiplayer online battle arena such as League of Legends would be much better at lane positioning or warding. Additionally, a racing game such as Forza Horizon would require abilities to do one-eighties and experience behind a simulation steering wheel.

Every game has different competition levels. Like in tennis, where every player who participates in a tournament is rated according to the Universal Tennis Rating, many eSports also have a ranking system. Of course, anybody can play casually, but a player in any rank could opt to play in local tournaments where matches are decided by skill level. A step up from a local competition would be playing with a team or for official online tournaments. In Valorant, this could mean playing in the Premier League, where anyone can make a team with their friends and play in an actual tournament for the chance to win. The Premier League winners have the potential to get drafted into the official Valorant Champions Tour, where the official, partnered teams play.

In most games at the highest level, there are usually two types of tournaments: A-Tier and S-Tier. The A-Tier tournaments are played by some of the best players and teams nationwide and are official professional contests. They boast prize pools in the hundreds of thousands of U.S. dollars. Once a player makes it to the S-Tier, they are in the major leagues. Players in the highest tier will sign to the biggest teams--such as Cloud9, G2, Fnatic, and Liquid--with the most funding and sponsors. Sponsors include companies like AT&T, Microsoft, Redbull, or Puma. With the support of these major corporations, the top tier players compete in tournaments where the prize money could be in the millions.

Not unlike a soccer team that wears the Adidas logo on their jerseys, professional eSports players will wear jerseys representing their sponsors. The world of eSports has transformed from a small group of gamers huddled in a dark room, into corporate-backed leagues of players characterized by their expertise level, eliteness, and competition.

IV. College Recruitment and Bootcamps

Just like with most other sports, colleges have begun to create eSports teams. An intercollegiate league, the National Association of Collegiate eSports (NACE), helps to bring more colleges and players into the eSports world. The NACE is affiliated with almost 700 colleges including Georgia State University, University of Texas at Dallas, Manchester University, and Northwood University. NACE works to create eSports teams within schools and provides scholarships to varsity leagues.¹⁶

Some colleges with eSports teams outside of NACE include Miami University or University of California at Los Angeles. Whether a team is inside NACE or another league, they hold tournaments in a variety of video games from Brawlhalla to Call of Duty to Hearthstone. These tournaments include a wide roster of colleges across the country and contain lucrative prize pools.

However, to join any of these college teams, a player must go through recruitment. Under the recruitment process, colleges hold tryouts and advertise their teams. Players who want to be a part of a team can decide to run a scrimmage with them to see if the team finds them to be a good fit.

After drafting a team, colleges and organizations must test the waters and observe how the gamers play together. A common tactic to assess the compatibility of teammates is to send them to bootcamp. They are sent to training camps where the only goal is to work together to create the best team possible. These camps help signed players to realize their strengths and weaknesses, while also being assisted by their peers and coaches. Such camps are similar to and function like the preseason training camps for football, soccer, baseball, and other traditional sports.

V. Conflicts and Controversies

In many professions, salary transparency can be a point of contention, and in eSports, it is no different. Some have argued that eSports should not be considered a real sport because of the lack of salary transparency. However, as players and contractors point out, more transparent salaries could be detrimental to the eSports industry. Professional gaming offers much less job security than traditional sports, and the players are much younger than those of any other sport. The average eSports professional is 22 years old, while in other sports such as basketball and baseball, the average age range is from 26-30 years. ShahZaM, an eSports professional for G2, explains, "These are mostly young kids in a volatile career that won't set them up for life."¹⁷

Part of the reason that careers in eSports are so volatile is because there are no unions to protect players. Although some games such as Counter-Strike have player associations, the majority of eSports players are completely on their own when it comes to negotiating contracts and salary. In eSports, unionizing can be tricky.¹⁸ Every game is tied to separate leagues and companies. This makes it so that there cannot be a singular union for all eSports, or even in some cases, for a single game. Video games have a fragile lifespan, and the best competitive games last ten to fifteen years. For unions, this short term popularity would mean that it is difficult to create a lasting labor bargaining organization when the eSports fan base for a particular game typically cannot be sustained for more than one decade.

As eSports is still a developing industry, salary transparency is not as important as establishing unions. With the lack of current job security, unions are crucial to protect the young players who may not understand the nature of contracts and fair pay. Once labor bargaining organizations are established and careers in eSports are less volatile, the players can begin working on salary transparency to guarantee equality in pay.

VI. eSports Are Sports

For professional gamers, eSports is a legitimate career and sport. At an elite level, gaming is physically taxing and requires immense skill that cannot be found in the casual player. eSports is not limited to professionals, as collegiate tournaments and divisions have become commonplace. Although eSports are not like traditional sports in the sense that there is a lack of salary transparency, eSports are not yet stable enough to make salaries public. Despite some minor differences, eSports have developed enough credibility and

popularity, and share enough traits with traditional sports, to be considered an established sport. eSports should be respected by mainstream audiences and sports media so that players can get the recognition that they deserve and the protections that they need.

Student Name: Grace Qi
Grade: 8
School: SpiderSmart at Sugar Land
Title: Everything is "Normal"
Category: Critical Essay
Key: Silver Key
Educator: Sharon Li

For weeks I have longed for the day when I get to hang out with my friends; however, when the day finally arrives, and my friends just stare at their phones, scrolling endlessly through TikTok and chatting with their other friends online, the only thing I want to do is to leave. What could've been a memorable day turns into a boring afternoon. A combination of addiction and social delusion keeps teen girls on social media, and, as it turns out, teen girls are just one of the many social groups that are drawn into the rabbit hole of social media. As of the beginning of 2023, a total of 38% of teen girls that participated in a Common Sense survey reported that they had ever stopped using or limited how much they used a platform because they felt it had a negative impact on them (Nesi, et al.). In fact, research has shown that teens who use social media are three times as likely to suffer from depression (Impact of Social Media). According to the CDC, Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, over the past few years, suicide has become the second leading cause of death for people ages 10-14 (Facts about Suicide); however, these deaths just represent the surface of the underlying outcomes from teen depression, and social media has been shown to be one of the major causes. The mental health of teen girls in America is deteriorating as social media tears down their health, self-image, and relationships. Addressing the negative aspects of social media is essential in order to improve teen girls' mental health.

The mental issues shown in teenage girls today come from the addiction to social media, which is largely caused by algorithms. From late-night scrolling to early morning messaging, using social media has become a habit for more than half of Gen Z. "We get a dopamine release in our brain when we pick up our phone or log into social media," explains Jessica Holzbauer, a licensed clinical social worker (Impact of Social Media). Dopamine is what causes us to find things interesting and build motivation, but when it is used in an unhealthy way, it can become the cause of addiction. Due to social media algorithms, dopamine becomes the cause that keeps many teens awake at night (Haynes). Four in 10 girls (41%) who use TikTok and roughly three in 10 girls who use YouTube (28%), Instagram (29%), Snapchat (31%), and messaging apps (29%) said these platforms interfere with sleep at least weekly (Nesi, et al.). In addition to the algorithms, blue light emitted from cell phones affects the production of melatonin which controls one's sleeping cycle. Thus, keeping the user awake and on social media. Algorithms

carefully manipulate the content users see by prioritizing emotionally triggering content in order to maintain their engagement (Ellwood). As the user starts to spend more time on the platform, the harder it is to get off. This issue is present in many teenage girls who have no idea how much social media is hurting them mentally and physically. If addiction doesn't stop, it can develop into more than just insomnia, school performance, and mental health problems.

Filtered and manipulated content contributes to the standardization and normalization of an unhealthy self-image. Many teenage girls who view edited and filtered posts of famous celebrities and their friends oftentimes feel body and facial dysphoria. A recent study from Facebook found that Instagram makes body image issues worse for one in three teenage girls (Impact of Social Media). Since Instagram is centered on likes and followers, many girls end up "feeling pressure to present the best version of themselves" or "feeling like other people's lives are better than mine" (Nesi, et al.). Even if teens know that the content they're viewing on social media is manipulated, it can still make them feel insecure about how they look or what's going on in their lives. For example, I know that my favorite K-pop idols wear a lot of makeup and have professionals taking care of their physical image, but even then, when I see their photos, I still compare my face and body against theirs. In reality, many teens do not realize how the standards and body image ideals they compare themselves to are unrealistic. Over time many girls develop eating disorders as well as depression from mental pressure and constant comparison. A 15 year-old said Snapchat had a negative effect on her self image because, "The filters cause a lot of facial dysphoria" (Nesi et al.). Filters in Snapchat cause teens girls to look "better" and it makes them feel obliged to post a picture with a filter on just for their friends to compliment them. Many teen girls believe that it is normal for them to compare themselves with others on social media, but the truth is, manipulated self image is not the standard everyone should be looking up to.

Facebook and Instagram are well aware that their products harm teens, causing depression in teens, especially teenage girls. Despite this reality, these companies have consistently refused to take the matter seriously (Social Media and Depression.). Social media platforms simply do not care if girls are negatively impacted by their content. Frances Haugen, a former product manager at Facebook, has brought some awareness about the experiences teen girls have been going through; she has also empowered some girls who have been scared of speaking out to do the same thing too. Yet, even though awareness has been spread, no action has been taken. Many teen girls still aren't able to step out of the darkness of social media because social media giants aren't willing to change their fundamental algorithms. Machine learning algorithms that Facebook and Instagram use create a powerful feedback loop. It can personalize what each user sees, and it will also continue to evolve with a user's shifting preferences (Hao). Negative posts related to self-image, mental health, and more are all commonly advertised by these algorithms. While social media platforms claim that they are positive, evidence has proven they are really the opposite. As Frances Haugen said, "If Instagram is such a

positive force, have we seen a golden age of teenage mental health in the last 10 years? No, we have seen escalating rates of suicide and depression amongst teenagers," (Hao). Among the many teenagers who reported suicidal thoughts, 6 percent in the U.S. traced them back to Instagram (Impact of Social Media). In today's modern society, social media platforms have found many ways to take advantage of teen girls. Algorithms and unrealistic (filtered) content are some of the many examples; however, this has become the new normal and the standard of beauty teenage girls constantly compare themselves to. I don't want it to come to the point where teens and their families have to face social media alone; a point where their voices for change can never be heard and taken seriously.

Overuse of social media all connects to one point: relationships. Ironically, high usage of Facebook, Snapchat, and Instagram increases rather than decreases feelings of loneliness in teens. Conversely, reducing social media usage can actually make teens feel less lonely and isolated, ultimately improving their overall well-being (Robinson). Some of my friends who are very introverted tend to spend much more time online because they find it more comfortable to socialize through screens, but this causes them to be addicted to their phones and social platforms. Being addicted to social media is strongly correlated with teen girls who check their phones often. The fear of missing out is a direct result of social media addiction and causes many teen girls to prioritize social media over real-life relationships. Human beings need face-to-face contact to be mentally healthy, and communicating with someone else who cares about them is crucial to reducing stress and boosting their mood (Robinson). Spending too much time on social media puts teen girls at risk of developing loneliness at the expense of reality and real-life relationships.

Some may say that social media provides more positive aspects than negative aspects. This statement is valid because social media does indeed have a lot of positive aspects. However, social media algorithms filter out many of these positive impacts. When I first downloaded TikTok, the algorithms mostly led me to negative videos and posts such as doing dangerous stunts, wasting food, adults who received plastic surgery, etc. I knew that if I stayed too long on a video with negative content, then I would get more of it, but at the same time, I didn't know what content I should be searching for. Subconsciously I continued to scroll endlessly in my recommended feed hoping that I would feel entertained. And before I knew it, I was already addicted. Every day, the highlight of my happiness would come from scrolling through social media and contacting my friends. I became less social with my classmates at school and I would often feel tired when I spent time off my phone. Like many other teenage girls, I had absolutely no idea how using social media was destroying my mental health.

What are some solutions to this increasing problem? Many feel as if nothing can be done to prevent teen girls from developing serious mental health problems, but the truth is, it is actually easier than they might think. With social media, we can find ways to use its positive aspects. Instead of scrolling endlessly as a result of algorithms, girls can explore

areas that interest them such as art, music, sports, life hacks and so much more. If there is no other motive for being on the app and endlessly scrolling for entertainment is what's left, then closing it is the best thing to do. There are also many ways for teen girls to improve their mental health such as having enough rest, spending time outside, taking care of their physical health, and socializing with others in person (Mental Wellbeing). Teen girls should not be the only ones who prevent themselves from negative aspects of social media. In fact, their families should not bear the sole responsibility of helping them protect their mental health either. Schools should help create a positive community through school connectedness, so teens, especially teen girls, can be able to express their emotions and look for support. Society should stop ignoring girls who are asking for help and start stepping out of their comfort zone to prevent social media from dictating and taking their lives. While this issue has been ignored for years, it is not too late to take action.

Today it is significant for all of us to help teen girls from being negatively impacted by social media. Unhealthy algorithms and content advertised by social media causes the mental health of teen girls to decline, directly impacting their relationships. I didn't realize what TikTok could do to my mental health until I was depressed and isolated. Not only did I feel unproductive and constantly moody, but my grades were dropping too. At that moment, I knew that I had to stop constantly scrolling through social media and focus on the people and the positivity around me instead. We need to consider what we should do to stop social media from negatively impacting girls. Many have started to recognize these considerations, but it is far from enough. Maybe it is the right time for all of us to stop ignoring girls who need help using social media and pretending that everything is normal.

Student Name: Claire Weng

Grade: 9

School: Margo Writing

Title: Family Line

Category: Novel Writing

Key: Silver Key

Educator: Margaret Tung

Chapter 9: Melody

Okay. Paint about a dream: that's easy! But wait; dreams have to be deep, there has to be some sort of symbolism... or maybe I'm overthinking the theme of the contest. That night, I pulled out all of my art supplies and set up everything to get to work. Instead, however, I ended up spending over 30 minutes staring at the canvas, trying to figure out a way to expand on my chosen idea. Everytime I sketched a circle or a line to begin framing a proportion, I would instantly erase it.

What is something that will separate me from all of the other contenders? I pondered, staring out the window deep in thought. The sky was pitch black, with the occasional blinding lights of a car zooming past. It was eerily quiet, with a slight breeze that sometimes rustled the leaves on a nearby tree. At that moment, my dad's black Toyota finally pulled into our driveway, arriving home at 9:30 p.m. I listened to the hum of his engine roll into our garage and shut off, and it hit me: My family.

Throughout the past two years, the one thing that has stopped me from completely devoting myself to my dream of pursuing art was my family. From my dad's inability to voice his support to my mom's extreme desire to mold me into my sister, I have always been too nervous to share my passion for art with them. If, in some way, shape, or form, I could incorporate the dynamics of my family into this painting, I could add an emotional depth to my painting and set it apart from other generic submissions about their dreams. I quickly got to work, putting in earbuds and working well past 2 a.m. sketching out basic drafts onto paper, taking references from family pictures and Pinterest images. When I was finally satisfied with the result, I went to bed, instantly falling asleep.

Over the next three months, my life repeated in a monotonous loop. On weekdays, I would wake up before the sun rose and work on my painting until 6:55 a.m., when I would fake being asleep until my mom "woke" me up. I would carry my supplies and set up to school every day under the guise that my AP art class was in the painting unit. When I arrived at school, I would rush through my Pre-Calculus problems in order to pack up early and be the first one out of the classroom—squeezing in an extra 3-4 minutes for my next period, art class. During third-period art class, I would continue to work on the painting. After school, I quickly flew upstairs to my room, finished my homework, and

then worked on the painting until well past midnight. Although I fell asleep a few times, I slowly adjusted to this covert routine, only able to accumulate around three to four hours of sleep each night. During the weekends, if I had the strength, I would continue to add layers to the painting, working detail by detail to ensure that my vision came together. Sometimes, I would be too tired to work, so I would sleep the entire day. Other times, I had to attend a math competition or catch up on problem sets my mom assigned me.

Slowly but surely, I managed to make progress on my painting. In the first week, I created a basic outline of my painting on the canvas, with rough shapes to resemble certain figures. In the second week, I worked on polishing the pencil marks on my canvas, smoothing out shaky lines, and adding tiny marks of detail to every square inch of the painting. In the third week, I created a basic tonal background and established the theme and colors I wanted to use in my painting. After that, it was all a matter of slowly adding to my canvas. First, I created a basic underpainting of my drawing, using rough and broad strokes for an initial color scheme. Layer by layer, I expanded on my piece, slowly building up more natural tones and stimulating textures, making sure to blend the colors as seamlessly as possible. In the last week before the contest deadline, I focused on intently polishing every last detail and patching up minor mistakes.

When I finally completed the painting an hour before it was due, I stood back and examined the piece in awe. I can't believe I just juggled my mom's math shenanigans and this entire competition at the same time. I couldn't help but smile, proud of myself for this accomplishment. The painting portrayed a self-portrait of me in my painting setup, sitting in the middle of a forest next to a lake painting the surroundings. Around me are signs of my family watching me. The shadow that trails behind me is the silhouette of a much taller figure winning a math competition: my sister. The reflection of the lake, which should be a selection of vibrant trees nearby, is instead warped into windy trees, the leaves morphed into a faint outline of my mom's face. The sky above is clear except for one faint cloud in the corner slowly drifting away: shaped like my dad. Throughout the seemingly peaceful scene, multiple hidden clues symbolizing my family are hidden in the scenery, representing my struggle to break free from their influence. For the final time in three months, I left my painting behind the curtains of my window to dry and locked up my painting supplies behind my closet, drifting into the first peaceful sleep that I had had in a long time.

The next morning, I submitted my painting as soon as I got to school, displaying it to my proud art teacher. "This should do well!" she exclaimed, nodding as she set my canvas on top of a stack of art pieces ready to be submitted. "Results will be mailed to you in around 5 months, please update me if you place!" I sure hope I do.

Dad

To counter my wife's complaints about not contributing to our daughters' lives, I always took on the mundane chores in our household. This week, when I picked up the mail after a long walk outside on a Saturday evening, a few unfamiliar packages stood out from the usual bills, advertisements, and magazines. Did Melody convince Peilin to buy more paintbrushes?

No. Melody finished her painting project months ago, so she wouldn't be in need of too much right now. After a large argument at the lunch table, I had noticed a change in my youngest daughter's demeanor. Each morning, when I was about to leave for work, I heard a slight shuffling upstairs, quiet but noticeable amid the deafening silence in the house. When I needed to use the restroom at night, I would notice a dim light still peaking out of her room's closed door. One time, after my wife took both Melody and May to a math competition, I curiously peered inside Melody's room, careful not to break anything as I examined the usual places her artwork was hidden. There, I saw a strange new project: a canvas, almost triple the size of her usual art pieces, resting on a windowsill hidden behind curtains. There was no paint on it yet, just rough sketches marked out in pencils. At the time, I had quickly stepped out of the room, not wanting to disrupt my daughter's secret business. Well, it's her and her mom's choices, not mine. Best not to bother anyone. Even when my wife sometimes talked to me at night in hushed whispers, worried about something being wrong with Melody's recent behavior, I remained quiet. There's no use in starting something that can only end up going downhill. Right?

Deep in thought, I hadn't noticed that I had trailed up to the front porch of our house again. Oh well, whoever's package it is will take care of it. When I walked into the house, I found the rest of the family already at the dinner table. As I dropped the stack of papers and packages on a countertop and took off my tennis shoes, my wife looked up with a frustrated expression.

May

"Ni zhong yu hui jia le (you're finally home)! Why do you always have to leave when we should be having dinner together?" My mom demanded when my dad approached the table. I looked up from my newly checked-out book, the second installment of the latest ancient Chinese historical fiction I was reading. My dad had a tendency to never show up until the last minute, waiting for all conversations to have passed before eating. At times, when my mom forced him to, he would eat with us, but it was a rare occurrence.

"Well, I'm here now," my dad responded, serving himself a bowl of fried rice noodles and sinking into his seat. My mom didn't reply, instead huffing to herself, muttering complaints under her breath.

Welp, time to get out of here. With the bowl in front of me nearly empty, I shoveled the last few mouthfuls of chashao (BBQ pork) in my mouth and quietly excused myself, getting out of my seat with my book in hand, index finger saving the page I was on. On my way out, I quickly shuffled through the pile of newly-brought-in mail, searching for a potential package of new intricately-designed wooden bookmarks I had ordered a few days ago. Upon finding a bulky yellow package, I quickly tore it open, eager to add to my collection.

I did not expect for my hand to bump into a heavy metal object. Taking it out, I got a clearer view of the words engraved on the round gold medal

Melody Yang

Marysville Art Competition

First Place Award

No way. In the past five months, I had witnessed my little sister work tirelessly on this art competition. Of course, along the way, I had teased her endlessly about it, but in the end, I was proud of her. In a sense, she had listened to me, evading the attention of our parents, focusing on what she was passionate about. I've always been somewhat guilty about being a people pleaser and overachiever, my actions resulting in my little sister being dragged into the exact same path as me. When I figured out that she had started painting, I was happy that she finally found something she was truly excited about.

I pulled out the next item in the package, a piece of cardstock paper with a letter attached to it addressed to Melody.

"After careful consideration regarding your submission to the annual Marysville Art Competition, we would like to congratulate you on winning first place in the painting division this year. We had over 2,000 submissions to this category this year, and your submission stood out. Along with this gold medal you have received, we would also like to send you a scholarship of \$500. Please fill out the form attached and mail the completed document to us. Additionally, your work will be published on our website gallery for millions to view. Once again, congratulations, and thank you so much for your incredible artwork this year!"

Oh wow, five hundred dollars as well. This is amazing! I quickly stuffed everything back into the package and handed it underneath the dinner table to Melody, who was still at the dinner table.

Melody

When my sister shoved a yellow-orange package in my face and shuffled away with a wink, I didn't know what to think.

"What is that?" My mom immediately asked, furrowing her eyebrows as if she could somehow be able to see through the bubble wrap that covered what was inside.

I ignored her, instead opening the package and looking inside. Inside, there was a bright gold medal, as large as the size of my fist, neatly surrounded on all sides by protection to keep it from being damaged. No way. Is this what I think it is? In anticipation, I quickly tore through the layers of plastic and read the words written on the piece of metal.

Melody Yang

Marysville Art Competition

First Place Award

Oh my god. I got first place! Our art teacher had said this week that awards would potentially be arriving soon in the mail. She had received a preliminary list of people that received a prize, but opted to not say anything, claiming that "the anticipation will be exciting!" I had fretted about the results of the contest all week, nervously staring out of the window of my room, bouncing my legs up and down in anticipation of the mailman coming with a different package in hand. Now that an award had arrived, and I was holding it in my hands, everything felt surreal. The three months that I had relentlessly worked day and night actually amounted to something. My mom, seemingly sensing the shocked expression plastered on my face, rose from her chair, leaning over the bowls of double-stewed soup to try and take a glance at what I was holding.

"Hold on," I mumbled half to myself, too exhilarated to argue. I pulled out the remaining papers from the package and started to examine the words on it.

“Aii yaa! Let me see!” My mom insisted, walking around the circular table to my position. She snatched the letter from my hands and pushed her glasses closer to her eyes, squinting at the lines of text on it.

“Stop!” I instantly tried to take back the paper, reaching for my mom’s swift arms and pulling when I grabbed ahold of it. My mom refused to let go, tugging harder as she strained to read the words. Both sides tried to gain possession, pulling harder and tugging until the paper ripped.

Mom

I stared open-mouthed at the two portions of the paper. Upon first glance, I could not discern what my daughter’s awestruck gaze was caused by. But, when I stalked over to take a glance at what she was viewing, too impatient to think twice, I couldn’t ever imagine the words that I would read.

“After careful consideration regarding your submission to this art competition, we would like to congratulate you—”

An art competition? Are you kidding me? For months on end, I had been concerned that something was wrong with my youngest daughter. Every morning, Melody would wake up with large bags under her eyes, but would suspiciously never complain about being tired. She started to stick around less and less during family meals, and although I had let it slide with May, having both of my daughters grow distant from me made me feel concerned that I had raised them wrong. I had admitted these feelings of guilt to my husband late at night, whispering worries of them possibly cutting me out of their life. He never responded directly, instead mumbling half-hearted excuses and awkward responses. Still, I brushed off these thoughts of doubt. All teenagers go through these phases from time to time. They just feel unmotivated; I need to push them out of this slump.

“Mom!” Melody cried, instantly dropping to the floor and scrambling to pick up the pieces. “What the hell?”

“What art competition?” I demanded.

“Why does it matter to you? Not like you care about what happens in my life anyways!”

“Of course I care! What is all this about?” How could she think this about me? I have only done the best for her.

“No you don’t! I have loved painting from the moment I started my AP art class. When I finally convinced you to give me that set, you didn’t understand how terrified I was—that you would see how happy it made me and destroy it! You have spent all of this time forcing me to do one thing or another, but have never taken into account how I actually

feel! So, maybe you may feel like you care about me, but you never show it!" She continued fuming. "Maybe there's a reason why I have spent the past two—almost three—years hiding something this big from you. Think about that."

Well, I probably would have allowed her to work on it, but only as a hobby. Art is too unrealistic to pursue, and I have known from personal experience to always take the most efficient route. Still, my daughter going against my word behind my back still left an ache in my heart. "I could have allowed it, but you know that art is an unrealistic career to pursue."

"Actually, that isn't true," my eldest daughter spoke up just as Melody parted her lips to form a rebuttal. "She earned \$500 for this. If she's good enough, she can go into digital." Melody's eyes widened, and she turned to May with a shocked and grateful expression on her face.

Dad

Five hundred dollars. Wow. Although I had known about this competition, I hadn't anticipated for it to earn that much money. Watching this encounter go down, I had quickly evacuated upstairs and silently watched from there. My wife stood her ground, rambling about how it wasn't viable in the future. My youngest daughter kept arguing back, pointing out certain art colleges and opportunities made available by her art teacher. The conversation went on in an endless loop until finally, they came to a compromise, too tired to continue.

"I will allow you to take art, as long as you continue with math as well," my wife sighed, exasperated.

"Okay, fine!" Melody responded, a slight smug smile on her face.

Once everyone had retreated back to their own areas of the house, I relaxed my tensed shoulders. Things worked out. And although we aren't that stable right now, it's only up from here.

Student Name: Katherine Liu

Grade: 11

School: Margo Writing

Title: Felicidades

Category: Poetry

Key: Silver Key

Educator: Margaret Tung

Congratulations

Estimados jóvenes fastidiosos/Esteemed annoying teenagers:

Estoy muy incontenta de haberlos conocido.

This is Spain, so perhaps I should say “habervos?”

Maybe my conjugations don’t match your dialect, but at least you understand me.

When we first passed by you and you saw the large group of predominantly Asian kids,

You shouted konnichiwa! at us.

Maybe you thought you were being friendly.

Maybe you thought our laughter meant you were funny.

I saw the short one’s wide, confused grin and another’s befuddled expression framed in dark glasses.

I’ll admit that I don’t understand why I laughed either.

I was in shock, flashing back to the other kids that we’d met, eight-year-olds who had greeted us with

Kung-fu kicks, arigato pips, and fingers pulling back their eyes like marionettes on sticks.

We had tried to teach them: “You’re speaking japonés, but I’m china and he’s coreano.”

I wish we had tried harder. I don’t want them to be like you someday.

Because you were a decade older, a local in a tourist town.

There’s no way that it was your first time seeing Asians.

That’s why I dragged my friends back, in hopes of correcting and connecting with you.

Yes, it was my fault for coming back. I didn’t have a plan;

I thought we could quickly resolve our cultural barriers,

then have a nice conversation in Spanish.

But you surprised me with something that’s never happened before:

you insulted three different aspects of my identity in under three minutes!

¡Felicidades!

Uno

We greeted you with “¡Hola!” and you responded with your version of a kowtow.

For a second, there was silence.

Then my Chinese friend started her grating Chinese

and my half-Japanese friend offered some soft Japanese

and you were overwhelmed by the onslaught of foreign words that demanded your attention.

Understandable, we really aren't the best at making friends.

But you might be the best at making enemies, because your first resort was to pull back your eyes, overbite your smile, and bob your head from side to side.

When you grow up, you should be an eight-year-old!

I tried to explain, "¡Somos americanos! We speak English!"

I shouldn't have unlocked that gate.

Dos

Your first words were unexpected.

"Come here," you gestured to the ten feet of pavement separating our main tourist road from your small town alleyway. (That's three meters for you.)

We shook our heads, no, no, no.

"Why?" I asked, hating my slow, unsure pronunciation.

"We talk better here."

"But...we can talk..."

How do I say "from here" I should know this I should know this I should know this.

When facing you, smirking teenagers,

I might as well have left every word back in Houston.

My friend saved me. “¡Podemos hablar desde aquí!”

And you noticed him.

You, with the dark squarish glasses, complementing your pale squarish face.

This letter is to you.

Instead of conceding or refuting or doing whatever a normal human in a normal conversation would do,

you pointed at him and shouted “Gay!”

No one paid attention the first time, so you yelled it again.

He’s not.

We all stared at you.

You explained yourself by mimicking a tic of his, where he rolls back his eyes on impulse.

We’ve all noticed. We all don’t care.

But you mocked him, exaggerated the rolling of your eyes
as if you were choking and on the verge of unconsciousness.

The funny thing is, if you had pointed at any other one of us,
you would have at least been on the right track.

Bi, ace, queer, were all available,

and yet you managed to pin down the one straight male.

He’s not gay.

And gay is not an insult.

Tres

You got bored. We were inching away.

Just for fun, just for some laughs,
you pulled out a card that you had been saving.

I don't know how many girls you've used it on.
I know it wasn't a first for you.

But it was a first for me.

You clearly enunciated, "I will fuck you."
You looked at me.
I blinked. Checked left and right. Turned back to you.
You smirked. You nodded.

The world collapsed into a pinhole of only you.
I remember the cigarettes strewn around your feet.
I remember your lascivious smile
Your eyes. Wide and wild.

My friends must have been talking to yours, because none of them heard.
None of them defended me,
Filled in words when my mouth couldn't form any.

I was afraid,
but too scared to show it.

So I muttered to my friends, "I don't think these people are very nice."
and I ran.

It was a flimsy few seconds for you, but it cost the night for me.
Every time I saw a teenage boy, I reverted back to the same position:
Right hand on my left shoulder, left hand on my right.
Forearms crossed securely over my chest.

Still protecting my body,
I found our tour guide in the crowd.
I climbed up onto the bench to stand beside him
and stared at the horizon in silence.

You didn't deserve a memory.
Nor did you deserve my fear.

I waited for you to remember my humanity, as
I waited for the sun to set.

Student Name: Katelyn McCollum
Grade: 9
School: J Mark Price's Reading & Writing Workshop
Title: Finding My Forever-Realm
Category: Short Story
Key: Silver Key
Educator: Star Han

The clear water ripples below my tiny sailing ship as I pull the wooden oar through it. The sun sits on the horizon, inching up as morning arrives. I can no longer see the shore where the realmspeople wished me well on my adventure. I have embarked to a new realm almost fifteen times, and each has felt as bittersweet as the first, when I left my family. Back then, I had thought finding my forever-realm would be easy; my sister always said that I'd have a gut feeling when I found it. But I have never felt that easy sense of belonging, not since I left her.

For most people, it only takes a few realms, but I've been to more than anyone else I know. It doesn't help that I don't have a gift. Most find that their forever-realm is where their gift just makes sense like those who can wield water finding their forever-realms on islands.

As I inch towards the edge of my last realm, there is nothing but a stretch of calm, navy blue water around me. With my arms moving rhythmically and my eyes drooping, my body falls under a familiar trance, leading me to my unknown destination.

I wonder about my new home. Will I find friends? Will it be like my last realm, with polar bears, wolves, and glaciers, or will I see new animals? As if summoned by my curiosity, a vast mirage appears, projecting bubblegum sunsets, towering mountains with majestic waterfalls, and stone palaces in the sky. Creatures of all sizes, colors, shapes, and species glide through the air. I must be hallucinating. I've never seen such a vivid picture above the threshold to a new world—most other portals revealed only a few hints of the world inside. I gaze at the top of the illusion where a scarlet dragon sits confidently laughing. The dragon's fangs shine in the pale moonlight as it grins and extends a paw, gesturing to the portal below, welcoming me into its home. This world must be the one for me; even the friendly dragon thinks so. Eager to explore, I dig my paddle intensely into the sea below as choppy waves slap against my boat. The surf pushes me through the opening and into the new realm.

Relief passes through me as the sun rises, its rays shining upon my face, my legs, my arms. Clouds shift in the sky, not one daring to cover the sun. As the mirage foretold, immense peaks with shimmering streams decorate the skyline. Scarlet cardinals soar above along formations of eagles and violet toucans. Families of whales dive through the

water beside me, whistling to each other. But what strikes me the most is the easy feeling inside me, like a puzzle piece falling into place.

“Wonderful, isn’t it?” A voice laughs, shaking me from my daze.

I spin around to find a dark-haired girl standing in a teal sailing boat. She reaches over, tying her rope steadily between our two vessels.

“You can’t just-” I start as she interrupts, “So miss, do you mind if we come aboard?”

“We? No, you can’t come-” I begin to decline. She tilts her head, her eyes narrowing as if saying Just let us on.

I sigh and shake my head, “No thank-”

She leaps into the middle of the boat.

“Who are-”

“I’m Isa, and these are my crewmates, Riyah, Conrad, and Finnian.” She gestures to the empty space beside her, and I survey her boat for other passengers.

“There’s no one ther-” I gasp as the trio materializes.

“Oh, you’ll be the perfect addition,” Conrad chuckles, leaning back on the wooden seat, ruffling his straight blonde hair.

“Indeed,” Finnian grins, holding out a hand. “Your name?”

“Marina.” I reach to shake his hand, studying his features. His skin matches Conrad’s, tan from sailing. The two boys bear a striking resemblance. Maybe brothers? Isa’s piercing blue eyes dazzle in the sunlight, and tattoos climb along her collarbone. Riyah looks almost identical with her matching outfit, aqua eyes, and tan skin. But instead of distinct tattoos, she has piercings up and down her ear.

“We have to show you the island, Mari.” Finnian grabs my hand, dragging me towards the sailing boat. I open my mouth to decline, but he cuts me off. “Don’t even think about it. You’re staying with us.”

I climb onto the craft and hesitate as Isa unties our boats. “Can we just leave it on the side?” I protest as my beloved sailing ship floats away.

She places a hand on my shoulder. “We’ll build you a new one if you decide to go again. Don’t worry about it.”

“Please don’t go already. You’re the best company we’ve had in weeks, and I think we’re sick of each other,” Riyah pleads, flashing another one of her infectious smiles. I grin back and stare at the horizon once more, observing the summits and castles lingering above them.

"So where do you guys live?" I inquire.

"Not really anywhere. We like to explore all the time. Our realm is the one of the largest on the planet, so we can go to any weather or landscape we would like. Plus, Finnian can teleport, so that helps," Conrad explains.

"Wait, so you're all teleporters?" My heart sinks. I definitely wouldn't fit in this realm.

"No! This is a realm of everything. Every gift you could think of. Every ecosystem. Anything you want!" Isa exclaims. I smile, sighing in relief, before Isa adds, "That is also why there's a test for newcomers..."

"Isa. Seriously. You didn't have to tell her so soon. Now she'll want to go!" Finnian laughs.

"You have to pass the challenges in order to stay, and they will push your gift to the LIMIT. You'll need every ounce of power you have!" Conrad proclaims. I shudder, rubbing my arm nervously.

"Well, uh, I don't have a--"

"You're going to do fine, I promise. The challenges really aren't hard with your gift," Riyah looks back, holding a thumbs up.

"But I don't have--"

"I don't know," Isa interrupts, "The challenges are kinda hard even with a gift, but it's too late to discuss. We are to take her to the shore for her challenge."

I lean into my boat seat, anxiety coursing through me. I thought this would be my forever-realm. I felt so at ease when I arrived; now, my stomach turns over as the boat bumps against the waves, moving closer to the sand. Dizziness washes over me as my vision blurs.

"I'm sure your gift is strong. Deep breath," A voice declares.

"You don't get it! I don't have on--" I blurt as my vision goes dark, the boats disappear, and I drop into the water.

Flailing, I come up for air and hastily observe my surroundings. Cold raindrops splash into my eyes as lightning strikes the water all around me. My legs aching, I kick and kick and kick, thrashing against the choppy waves. Water fills my lungs as I submerge and struggle to catch air as the undertow tugs me from side to side. I won't make it out of here without a gift. I'm too weak.

Just as my legs give out, a mysterious current pulls me to shore, and I sigh in relief.

I step out of the water and collapse onto the sand, my clothes sticking to me. I struggle to stand back up, take a step forward, but the beach disappears under my feet.

In its place is my first home island, the day I left. As my boat departs from the sandbank, my friends appear at the dock, shouting good luck as I sail away. I miss them. This was the wrong choice; I should've never left. They're the best friends I'll ever meet and the closest thing to my family after my sister passed.

Tears drip down my cheeks as the memory fades away, and pitch black surrounds me. I search for the sun, a candle, or a lamp, but nothing emerges from the darkness. My sweaty hands tingle as I take shallow breaths in.

A voice echoes, Hello, Marina. I swivel around and reach through the darkness.

A warm surge of energy swirls inside my head, and I exhale, steadying myself. What's going on, Mar? I've never seen you so unsure of yourself. The voice asks. I recognize the voice.

Sonia? But you're dead. You d-i-i-ed. I stumble on the words as my lips quiver.

It doesn't matter. What matters is that you need to make it out of this challenge. When we were kids, you were always sure you'd win- no matter what game we were playing. You never had any doubt. I don't see how this is any different!

This isn't a simple card game, Soni!

Sure, Marina, but why are you hesitating now?

Because—

Because I've never belonged anywhere. I will never be able to settle in a realm without a gift.

Because I left my best friends behind, the only friends I'll ever have.

Because I always make all the wrong decisions! I should've never let Sonia leave me that day.

I'll always be with you.

Her words bring a swirl of new memories. Racing down the street. Sneaking out at night to swim. Climbing up trees. One after another. My eyes widen as our last memory together fades in.

We sat on the dock, waiting to borrow a boat from her friend.

"Mari, I think it's time we go," she pleaded.

"Soni, you know I can't go with you. I have to stay."

"I can't- I can't leave without you." She stumbled on the words, her lips quivering. "I'm sure we can find our forever-realm together. We'll never be apart."

"Soni, no. No one's ever found one together." Boat headlights lit up the dock as Soni uncrossed her legs and stood up. She swallowed and held out a hand.

"I know we can find one together, Mar. We've always done everything together." She insisted as the boat's headlights grew brighter and brighter. I shook my head and backed up further towards the shore, my legs wobbling. She nodded in understanding as she stepped into the boat. We locked eyes as tears streamed down her face, and she mouthed I love you. The vessel speeded away, spraying the saltwater over me.

The next morning, they found the boat capsized near a sandbar with no bodies. Weeks later, they found her floating just before the portal to the new realm.

The memory fades away as more tears pour down my face.

I've rooted for you since day one, Mari, and I'll keep cheering you on. You've already seen so much of what's outside our homeworld; you can't stop now.

I wipe my face with my trembling hands as I push through the storm of memories.

But you can't leave, I declare.

I won't. Her words loop in my mind as my body teleports away, away, away back onto the seat by Finnian. He gasps and smiles, pulling me in for a hug as the others congratulate me.

"Mari! You did it! You can stay!" The girls shriek as they clap.

"You're stuck with us forever." Finnian laughs.

"Mmmm...maybe an adventure to commemorate the moment?" Isa asks, receiving nods from around the group.

"How about our newest member? You ready to leave us or are you up for a trip? With a little teleporting? Courtesy of me, of course." Finnian winks, holding out his hand as the others gather around him. I consider him for a moment. Sonia enters my mind, Mari, if you don't go, I swear I'll- I don't let her finish her thought as I grin and leap up, latching onto him.

"Don't drop me please," I whisper.

"Mari, I'm not a bird; we won't be flying. But...you should probably hold o-" He chuckles as the boat melts away, and our bodies blink into our new destination.

Student Name: Annabelle Peng
Grade: 9
School: Awty International School
Title: How a Wall Leads to a Fire
Category: Short Story
Key: Silver Key
Educator: Amanda Wood

A piece of news floated around the impoverished neighborhood: "New family moved in last night."

Normally, this wouldn't cause any surprise, but even the kids, from as little as five to the teenagers, had huddled up and were whispering amongst themselves due to a second, more interesting part:

"They're rich."

"Used to be. I was up when they moved in. A dad and two kids. No servants or anythin'."

"Duh. Or else why'd they be here?"

Riot, the oldest, after listening, knocked his fist on the wall behind him and everyone obediently fell silent.

"Everyone, listen up." He spoke up confidently, thinking things up as he went. "Maybe they're rich and maybe they ain't. Don't think of stirring up any trouble yet. If they are, we could make good on this opportunity." After no one replied, he rushed on. "Think about it. This is our chance to get our hands on goodies we can't get here in The Outside."

Listening to the others murmur, Riot smirked, and in his head, his plans solidified.

He picked two of the older kids that he was close with to come with him: twins called Cheet and Tray.

After Riot sent everyone back home, he and the twins took apples from each of their homes as a peace offering, and then went off to find their new neighbor.

Standing in front of the rumored house, the contrast between it and the shacks nearby was apparent. No trash in front and newly boarded wood over the windows. There was even a small flowerpot sitting near the door. The rumors had not been completely baseless.

Riot wore a sly smirk when he knocked on the door for the first time. As he waited for a response, a plump man with a jeweled cane formulated in his imagination.

Although his torn clothes and dirty skin didn't show it, Riot wasn't violent. However, he was by no means a saint and loved instigating mischief.

It was impossible, he thought, for the new family to look at them without thinking them inferior. But then, once they'd inevitably lose their savings, their situation would be no different from anyone else's. After that, The Slums would reject them in the same haughty way the Insiders looked down on them from over their wall. The adults already avoided them like the plague, and surviving in a place so neglected was impossible without the support of others.

So why not milk them to get what you can and help speed up the process?

But contrary to his expectations, a skinny boy a few years younger than him answered the door.

The three took a minute to scan him. His clothes were simple—but still of nice quality—and he had healthy, delicate skin that spoke of a good life. He stood rigidly and his brown eyes didn't mask their suspicion.

"If there's nothing, then I'm going back inside," the boy said guardedly after a moment of silence.

Riot caught the door as the boy tried to close it.

"Not gonna invite us in?" Cheet sneered nastily, stepping forward. "Thought folks from the Inside were all about politeness."

The boy narrowed his eyes. Riot shot Cheet a warning look, but subconsciously noted that the boy didn't deny where he was from.

Riot cleared his throat, straightened his slouch, and dangled the apples in front of Cheet's face to hide his expression. "Geez, we were just joking. Welcome to The Outside."

He waited for the boy to swat the fruits away, but after a moment he flushed, accepted them, and motioned for them to enter.

"Sorry, we don't normally let strangers in, but I suppose it's normal here. Please make yourselves comfortable."

Although Cheet was normally the one to begin a conversation, he fell uncharacteristically quiet as he stared around the house. The interior wasn't mansion-like, but everything in it radiated sophistication. Meanwhile, to fill Cheet's silence, Tray offered short compliments for small talk.

But a minute later, a bulky man pushed past the boy, introduced himself as the head of the family, and escorted them outside with obvious, forced politeness. There was a click as the door locked behind them.

For a second, they were in shock.

When they began to head back, Cheet scoffed and snorted, "Told ya it wasn't gonna work."

Tray shrugged. "Not like you helped make a good impression."

"What're you on about?" Cheet flushed crimson. "Didn't you see how that guy shoved us out?"

They were still arguing when a crash echoed from the house they'd just left.

A minute later, the same, bulky man stomped out and threw the apples away.

Cheet almost bolted back. When he was pulled away by Riot and Tray, he hollered, "If he didn't want 'em, I'd gladly take 'em back!"

After that, Cheet didn't want to come. Riot went over with only Tray, and they agreed it was hopeless to win over the father. Later, they found that most of the time, he was absent or too drunk to absorb a word, and after Riot one day decided to insult him to his face, they stayed clear of him whenever he came home. Meanwhile, the boy's baby sister was too young, so that just left the boy himself to befriend.

His name was Elio, and after their second meeting, he warmed up.

"It's 'cause no one else goes near them," Tray told Riot once. "Everyone's scared of making trouble for themselves."

"Nah, it's 'cause nobody likes Insiders," Riot responded.

"Whatever." Tray laughed but not happily. "Must get lonely, right?"

Unexpectedly, Elio avoided topics discussing life inside The Wall. Whatever the reason was, Riot was amazed. He'd thought there'd be no limit to their bragging of it.

At times, he even felt that Elio was almost the same as the other kids he'd grown up with. Just quieter. But how could that be? Like the wall physically separating the high and low class, there seemed to be an imaginary wall between Elio's family and the rest of The Slums too.

Still, Riot was true to his idea. He took a little each time and shamelessly asked for favors.

But each time he did, he felt a sprout of guilt growing in the back of his mind. Whenever he felt its existence, he'd quickly bury it with other thoughts, hoping it'd wither out.

On the other hand, Riot often had to remind Tray that going over was solely to take advantage of their resources. As time passed, Tray didn't bother to hide his opinion on what they were doing. He didn't once ask Elio for anything, saying that he was doing fine.

When Riot berated him about this, Tray defended himself: "You don't feel bad? It's not like his father's gonna get on his feet soon, and Elio still has a sibling to worry about. I can relate to that, at least."

Meanwhile, Cheet drifted away from the both of them and lurked more with the other kids.

One day, he cornered them on their way back home.

"Tray," Cheet said, popping up beside them in the thin grey alleyway, "Ma sent me. Still gonna have dinner?"

"You haven't eaten yet?"

"No." Cheet's face darkened. "We've been waiting, but you went back to that house, didn't you?"

A moment later, Riot realized that the rest of the kids had crowded around them and were intently listening in.

"Yeah," Riot interjected before Tray could speak, "we brought treats. Want some?"

As Riot opened a bag of fragile tarts and began to share, Cheet scowled.

"Stop eating!" He'd snapped, voice raising. "We looked up to you, Riot, but you've changed! You spend more time with those Insiders than us these days! Leeching off them isn't that important! We're fine not lookin' at them in the first place! If that kid really wants to be one of us, then maybe he'd actually try some more! Rotten Insider still thinks we're dangerous filth!"

"Haven't I been bringing you guys back stuff?" Riot's jaw clenched. "What're you accusing me for? And why would Elio wanna come out when y'all are like this?"

"See? Always defending him!"

"Listen! We're all brothers, alright?" Riot asserted loudly, hoping to placate everyone. "I'm not gonna side with Insiders over y'all, so calm down and eat your sweets!"

But Cheet didn't relent at all. Talking with him became difficult and Riot relieved his frustration by taking it out on Elio, who never seemed to be able to defend himself. Instead, Elio slowly stopped letting Riot freely take things whenever he asked.

Furious, Riot stopped visiting. When his anger wore off, he assured himself that he wouldn't go back and it didn't matter. He still had the others, and there wasn't a lot left that he could take at that point. Slowly, he began to re-integrate himself with Cheet and the other kids.

It didn't feel the same.

A rift had grown between them, and they looked at each other with suspicion. Silently, Riot noticed how Cheet had taken his position as a leader and how he'd fallen out of the loop.

Sometimes he'd wish he'd never even met Elio, but other times he'd incredulously miss his calm company.

"Brat grew on me," he'd mumble.

Cheet'd been right. He'd changed.

But he never could've guessed how their next meeting would happen.

Riot met up with Cheet that night at their usual spot. There were a few younger kids fiddling with lighters. Riot felt half-asleep, tripping as he walked.

"Riot!" Cheet tossed him a sack. "Wasn't sure you were coming! C'mon, let's go."

"What're we doing?" Riot groaned. "It's midnight."

Cheet responded with a smirk and began to walk away. Everyone else scrambled to follow. The sack felt rough and ominous in Riot's hands.

"Why're we here?" Riot whispered stiffly when they stopped in front of Elio's house.

Cheet spoke quietly to the smaller boys before returning to Riot, slinging an arm across his shoulder and walking him towards the entrance of the home. The smaller boys ran to the back. "Actually, you gave me this idea. Can't miss an opportunity right?"

Cheet kneeled in front of the door, taking a pin out of his sack and fiddling with the badly built lock on the door. Riot lightly pulled Cheet's shoulder.

When he didn't budge, Riot hissed, "What're you doing?"

"Picking the lock. You taught me, remember?"

"Cheet!"

Cheet ripped off the lock and glared. "Listen. I'm givin' you one chance to redeem yourself. This is it."

Without another word, Cheet swung open the door and stepped in, leaving Riot no choice but to follow him.

The house's condition had deteriorated since Riot had last been there. It stank, the wallpaper had peeled off, and most of the furniture had disappeared.

"Cheet," Riot said quietly as Cheet wandered around the dark home, "there's nothing here. Elio said they sold most of their things."

"This is a crime," Riot tried again after being ignored, "we don't do this here. We're all brothers."

"Shut up!" Cheet snapped as he stumbled over scattered bottles of alcohol on the floor. "Ya sound like Tray! What brotherhood? He's an Insider!"

Cheet kneeled and searched through a cabinet. After a moment, he lifted a small watch.

"Well, guess your friend lied." He stuffed it into his sack. "Riot," he said coldly, "the others already don't want you no more. I told you, this is your last chance." Cheet pointed down a short, skinny hall leading to a closed room. "Go take a look there. I'll check this closet."

Riot's stomach twisted. "Elio's father's in that room. He'll hear me."

"I can smell his drunk-ness from here. No chance he wakes up."

Cheet couldn't be persuaded.

Holding his breath, Riot entered.

Unlike the other rooms, Riot had never been there. At first glance, he realized there was a lot more furniture in this room.

Riot began to search around, grimacing whenever Cheet made a noise. Loud thumps or screeches seemed to vibrate through the house every few seconds.

But Cheet had been right. Elio's father stayed dead asleep on his stained mattress. Riot only hoped that Cheet's carelessness wouldn't wake Elio either.

The room felt sticky and warm. Riot shifted uncomfortably, absorbed in his task and thoughts. The sound of others around the house melted into white noise.

Riot chewed his lip and wiped his clammy palms. What if Cheet went into Elio's room? Besides the rooms they were currently checking, Elio and his sister's room was the only one left. What would he do if Elio woke up and saw him?

Riot shook his head and steeled himself. So what? What could Elio do? Who would he tell? Why would he worry over an Insider's opinion anyway?

His sack was half-full.

Yes, he had to do this.

Sweat trickled down his neck. He wasn't nervous, he assured himself. It was the room. The room was hot...

Riot snapped out of his thoughts. The room was almost unbearably hot. The noise that he'd been ignoring was now roaring in his ears. Riot grabbed his sack and ran out of the room, pulling his shirt to his mouth and calling for Cheet.

Smoke was piling over itself. Crackling flames had consumed the entire back wall of the house and was creeping along the floor. How'd he not notice? Riot coughed and dipped his head, straining his ears to listen for any cries of help.

There was a crash somewhere—as if someone was trying to break down a door. He whirled around, thinking fast. The living room and closet didn't have one, and Riot hadn't closed the door to the room he'd checked.

Riot's eyes widened, and his blood felt as if it turned to lead. His legs fell into a sprint as he ran across the house, struggling to avoid knocked-over clutter in a growingly dense smoke.

There was a couch blocking the doorway to Elio's room.

Elio's voice could hardly be heard. Riot called out Elio's name and scrambled to place his back on one side of the warm and coarse furniture. His sack dropped to the floor and into the fire as he pushed.

Elio recognized his voice. He pounded on the door harder, his scream hoarse and agnoizing. "Riot! Get us out of here! Please!"

"How'd you not wake up?" Riot yelled back, thinking about the earlier noise and cursing how he wished it'd be quiet enough not to attract Elio's attention. The couch slid a couple of inches.

"I thought my father was just throwing things! Riot, the door opens to the outside! Is there something in the way?"

"Yes," Riot grunted. His heart was pounding in his chest and his eyes were drilled on the distance between the couch and the door frame that he was decreasing bit by bit.

Someone jerked Riot away.

"What're you doing?" Cheet hollered raspily. "Let's go!"

"They're trapped!"

"I know! Let's go!"

"You're crazy!"

Cheet forced him away. Riot stumbled back one step, and Cheet cut off his way back to where he was, continuously pushing him all the while.

"We don't have time for this!" Riot yelled and shoved Cheet back.

"You're still trying to help them? Let the Insiders rot! Let's go!"

"Did you do this, Cheet?" Riot spat, incredulous. "Did you?"

Cheet lunged towards him. The two fell on the ground, wrestling as the burning floor stung their backs.

Riot shook himself out from under Cheet's grip and threw him off. Cheet recovered and tried to leap on him again.

Riot was struggling to breathe. The oxygen in the room was rapidly depleting.

Someone ran in between them, catching and pushing Cheet a steady distance away from Riot.

"Are you guys insane? Get out of here!"

Through the smoke, Riot saw it was Tray and realized that such a large and bright fire would definitely attract the attention of the other people in The Slums.

In that split second, he got back on his feet and pulled the couch from in front of the door. It swung open. Smoke poured out of the previously enclosed room.

"Tray!" Riot wheezed. His mouth was dry, and his chest throbbed, but Tray seemed to understand.

Tray ran over and caught Elio's sister just as she crumbled forward. He tossed a couple of damp towels to Riot as he let a gasping Elio collapse onto his other shoulder for support. Riot forcefully motioned for him to leave, and Tray hesitated once, calling out to them desperately—his movements awkward as if he wanted to take them too—before helping Elio and his sibling stumble away.

Riot tried to follow when Cheet slammed into him again. The towels dropped to the ground.

Cheet's eyes looked like the eyes of someone drowning: crazed and unclear.

Riot kicked him away. He grabbed Cheet's shoulders before he could hit him again and in a panicked state of mind, began yelling, "Cheet! We have to get out! What d'you think you're doing?"

Cheet faltered and his eyes became more confused than anything. His mouth moved and Riot, not caring if he was trying to argue or hit him, released him. He began to stumble backwards towards the front door while half dragging Cheet along, lacking the clarity of mind to first turn around.

His leg was scorchingly hot...

Suddenly, he realized what Cheet had been mouthing and tried to pivot, but he was too sluggish.

Something smashed into the back of Riot's head, and he crumpled.

The world was flickering.

Woozily, Riot saw Cheet tackle his attacker. The liquor bottle that Elio's father had hit him with rolled away and burst into flares of blue fire. Meanwhile, the flames ate with wild abandonment, growing voraciously. As if in slow motion, the roof, flimsy and aflame, collapsed in front of them, closing them off from the exit.

In the back of Riot's mind, he thought he heard Tray calling for them...

His body was burning and bleeding, but he could hardly feel anything anymore.

Student Name: Chloe Weng

Grade: 10

School: Margo Writing

Title: Immolation

Category: Poetry

Key: Silver Key

Educator: Margaret Tung

Syrupy crimson drips down Persephone's chin:
he sighs. I told you, you need only eat the seeds.
But she devours every mouthful of the pomegranate
with her hands, the flesh rendering her fingers
sticky with juice. He whisks her down to the
underworld, and as her mother screams her name,
she clenches her fists and does not look back.

Even the nimblest of nymphs cannot outrun a god:
Daphne knows this, and she does not try to flee this time,
staring at the river and waiting for him to catch her.
I want you, let me have you, he begs, feasting on her
with ravenous eyes. She swallows her revulsion and
opens her arms as they twist into laurel branches,
for even as a tree she knows she will never be free.

Helen of Troy flees to her lover's bed chambers:
before he even calls her, she steals away as her husband
sleeps, tears marking trails down her porcelain cheeks.
Her lover frowns. Why are you weeping, darling?
Your king launches a thousand ships for your beauty,

but you belong solely to me. She nods, acquiescing,
waiting for the war that will advance a week early.

King Midas's daughter leans into his touch:

he flinches back, his hand gesturing to the golden dishes,
the golden grapes, the golden statues of servants.

This is a product of my greed, but I love you
more than all of this. She shakes her head, then finally
embraces him, her soft ivory skin hardening into solid gold.
Her response is left for only the reeds to murmur:

I am only playing my part in your story:

to be a victim for your suffering,
to offer my body for your lust,
to immolate my worth for your desire,
to gift my pain for your growth.

Student Name: Kevin Song

Grade: 8

School: SpiderSmart at Sugar Land

Title: Investing in Permanent Housing: Solving Homelessness

Category: Critical Essay

Key: Silver Key

Educator: Sharon Li

Life out on the streets. As the sun sets, you realize that you have no money for food, let alone a place to stay the night, so you're forced to just sleep on the cold, hard concrete. The feces and waste on the streets makes it not only unsanitary but also unsafe. According to USA Facts, "The Department of Housing and Urban Development counted around 582,000 Americans experiencing homelessness in 2022" (USAfacts). And everyday, around 20 houseless people die. Just because they lack a home, they are being victimized every single day, and we need to take action now. While most solutions to the problem of homeless people suffering include homeless shelters or taxing the rich, the most simple and efficient way is having the federal government give homeless people free, adequate housing with the money they spend on homelessness programs. Global Giving, an organization that focuses on societal problems, states in their report on the Department of Housing and Urban Development that it would only cost \$20 billion to end homelessness with permanent housing. At first, this may sound like a great number, but when we journey deeper into the rabbit hole, we see that Americans spend \$19 billion a year on unused appliances and spend more than \$35 billion a year on gym memberships. If average Americans spend this much money, think of what the government is able to spend. Because of this, we can see that ending homelessness is a highly achievable plan (Adler). It is a moral obligation that the US government provide the homeless and low-income families with free, adequate houses as shown by the experiences of Brandon Brown, Ethan Christy, and Jennifer Millar.

The first homeless person I read about with an interesting situation is Brandon Brown. As Sophia Muce writes in the Central Recorder, Brandon Brown is the father to his three children, a devoted husband, an apartment maintenance worker, and homeless. For three months in the fall of 2021, the paychecks he picked up at the end of his 50 hour work weeks funded trips to Wendy's and hotels (Muce). Brown is currently squatting in a company owned apartment, and his income is not nearly enough to properly feed his wife and kids. His low income job is just throwing him in a cycle, an endless loop of debt and poverty. And every time he and his family move is endangering their safety. The Office of Policy Development and Research writes that people in poverty want to live in safe neighborhoods, but too many people in different places experience violent or non-violent crime everyday. Impoverished households struggle, more than others, to find

shelter in secure neighborhoods. Being a victim of crime or even fearing crime, could result in physical and mental health issues (Office of Policy Development and Research). Homeless and low income families are more likely to be victims of crimes because they are forced to move into the cheapest, most convenient homes which are usually located in a dangerous neighborhood. Additionally, Kimberly Burrowes writes, "When people are stably housed, they have fewer recorded non-violent offenses" (Burrowes). For instance, people commit fewer survival crimes such as theft for basic needs or even prostitution for money. A report on survival crimes in Canada shows that cities saw a spike in crime because there was a lack of services to alleviate financial burdens. Housing can be a strong factor that leads to diversion from entering the jail system (Burrowes). Permanent housing will help people such as Brandon Brown and his family, and they will avoid witnessing or experiencing murders, assault, and other types of felonies. This will improve the mental and physical health of the overall homeless population.

The Central Recorder continues by exploring the story of Ethan Christy. Sophia Muce writes, "Ethan Christy, an 18-year-old originally from Michigan, went to his principal and told him about his abusive household: his parents were alcoholics in a rocky relationship, ending in three divorces and multiple evictions" (Muce). Sophia Muce continues by stating that Christy asked the principal if he could participate in a program that allowed impoverished students to graduate early. Christy said his principal denied him, so Christy started to school; At 15, Christy dropped out and left home. In the summer, he drove to his two jobs on a run-down moped. He was often forced to find park benches for a place to sleep. By 16, he bought a car and slept in parking lots on bitter winter nights when it was negative 13 degrees (Central Recorder). Because many of the younger homeless population are rejected by their parents, they are forced to camp out in the streets or in a car to survive. The story of Christy shows how harsh the environment is for homeless people with no shelter or inadequate housing. The cold can give frostbite and colds, and the unsanitariness of the streets often spreads diseases and viruses. As stated by the National Library of Medicine, "Housing is an important determinant of health, and substandard housing is a major public health issue." 4.8 million Americans live in houses with moderate health issues; Because of this, around 13.5 million nonfatal injuries and 2 million make emergency room visits for asthma per year." (Krieger and Higgins). Just because of faulty and cheap houses, millions of low-income and homeless Americans make frequent hospital visits. By implementing a free, adequate housing system, hundreds upon thousands of lives would be saved each year. Millions of people would not be victims of non-fatal and fatal injuries.

Another person enduring homelessness is Jennifer Millar. Anna Gorman interviewed Millar and stated that Jennifer Millar regularly pours water mixed with hydrogen peroxide on the concrete patches she calls home. But her encampment is always being littered with filth, and soaked with urine and human waste. Rats are often found and which makes Millar worry about all sorts of diseases. For example, Los Angeles experienced a Typhus outbreak, a disease commonly spread by arthropods and rodents. The disease is found in

streets and even in the City Hall. If infected, without proper antibiotic treatment, there is a mortality rate of up to 60% (Gorman). The streets and shelters that the homeless use as their safe haven or home is no longer sanitary. Residents of dwellings such as City Halls now fear water contamination and bacteria. Furthermore, Paula Braveman writes that high housing-related costs cause trade-offs between expenditures such as healthcare and basic needs. The homeless and low-income usually have difficulty paying rent, mortgage or utility bills were less likely to have a usual source of medical care and more likely to postpone emergency treatments. Another study shows that children in poverty tend to have worse health and more behavioral problems (Braveman). Most households find themselves spending their budget on maintaining an unsanitary house or their basic needs and some don't even have a budget to spend at all. Adequate housing will help individuals exposed to diseases and infections through feces or inadequate houses. By eliminating trade-offs, they will have less health issues and emergency visits. They will be able to spend their money on healthcare and finance a clean house.

Some may argue against free housing by saying that the government does not have enough money to fund housing. However, this is simply not true; Sami Adler writes that the government spends an average of \$35,578 per year for every homeless person. Much of this money goes toward services including food stamps, shelters, and emergency departments. Permanent housing costs \$12,800 per person (Adler). The government would be saving \$22,778 per person with around 585,000 people as of 2023. Permanent housing is like an investment the US government can make; putting in just a mere \$20 billion can save around \$13 billion and 585,000 suffering lives.

Even though some people believe that there is no way free, adequate housing is fiscally possible, morality demands we find a way to help homeless people. Because thousands of homeless and low income households are in misery, housing is one of the most important issues in today's society. We all need to do what is just and what is moral and implement a free housing system. If not, the problem of homelessness will keep on rising, and the number of people suffering will grow almost exponentially.

Student Name: Maggie Barth

Grade: 9

School: Home School

Title: Lidera

Category: Novel Writing

Key: Silver Key

Educator:

Summary

Twelve-year-olds Kate and Cayla are on a camping trip one summer when an earthquake and two mysterious boys change their lives forever. They discover they are Världen, a hidden people who can command one of the five types of spirits—water, earth, wind and weather, fire, and plant and animal. Soon both girls are forced to leave their old lives behind and live in one of the tribes of Världen, learning to use and control their powers and having to adjust to a brand new people, school, language, and environment.

Soon, however, Kate's parents are murdered and Cayla's family mysteriously disappears. Kate, Cayla, and two new friends they make at an orphanage decide to take a dangerous risk and attempt to find the murderers, all while maintaining their lives in the Världen world and keeping their campaign hidden from the Royal Family. Along the way, all four girls discover secrets of the Världen world which they soon wish had remained hidden. The history of the Världen tribes is even more shrouded in mystery than they or anyone else realizes, and deadly enemies may be far closer than they seem—enemies they may not discover until it's too late.

Chapter 2

The dream sucked Kate in as soon as she lost consciousness. She stood in the middle of an open field with walls of forest on either side. She could see the sun rising in the distance, and a light breeze swept through the grass.

“Beautiful, isn't it?”

She turned to face the source of the voice. A woman stood next to her. She looked young, with long, wavy blond hair and a kind, heart-shaped face.

Kate nodded, but before she could say anything in response, the woman added, "Do you hear them?"

When Kate didn't respond, the woman set a gentle hand on her shoulder. "Listen."

She did hear them. They weren't so much voices as they were whispers into her head.

Do not fear.

She sucked in a breath, her eyes darting instinctively from side to side. "Wah-?...Who...what are you?" Kate rubbed her temples. They spoke in sync but were undoubtedly multiple voices.

We are nothing and everything, friend and enemy, fiendish and gentle; but that does not matter now. We want to help you.

"But what are you?" Kate pressed a hand against her chest, trying to slow her racing pulse. "And help me with what? With what's happening with Cayla and me?"

A pause.

We do not know the girl of which you speak.

Kate frowned. "Cayla. My friend who's been having the same visions as me." She hesitated. "Only, she only felt the earth shake. She didn't feel the wind, the trees, or the rain, or...hear you guys."

We don't know who you speak of. We feel your mind only.

Kate shook her head. "Who are you? If you really do want to help me, then...fine. Show yourselves."

The voices paused for a heartbeat. We can often be daunting to human eyes. We regret saying it, but for your sake, child, we cannot.

"I don't care how daunting you are," Kate snapped, kicking the ground. "I just want to see you, so you're not just a creepy voice in my head."

Another pause. Very well; but you may regret your demand.

The trees rustled. Then they began to emerge.

Kate's breath froze in her lungs.

They looked like human shadows—they had little color, barely moved, made barely any noise, and had no clothing, skin, or features whatsoever. They hovered towards her like phantoms, their unearthly whisper carrying in the wind. Yet the sight of them made an instinctual fear bloom in Kate's chest stronger than she'd ever felt in her life.

The living shadows stalked closer and closer toward her. Kate stumbled off and began to run like she never had in her life, running like death itself was chasing her. She pumped her legs harder, trying to cover more ground at once—

She wasn't going anywhere. It was like someone had placed her on an invisible treadmill. She forced her legs to move harder, faster. The thick, dark forest behind her only grew closer, opening up and threatening to swallow her whole...

Kate startled awake. Sweat slicked her brow. She put a hand on her chest, feeling her racing pulse as her companions stirred around her in the tent. As the dream faded away, the details of real life unfolded before her: her friends gently stirring in their sleeping bags around her, and the sun peeking in through the tent's window. She'd never felt more relieved to wake up in her life, even when the annoyingly cheerful voice of one of the teacher chaperones broke through her shock, announcing they had about five minutes before they had to head over to the fire pit for morning announcements.

Kate glanced around, her gaze landing on Cayla on her left and Rose and Abby in front of her, all of them groggily trying to orient themselves.

Rose sat up and rubbed her eyes, then glanced at her watch frantically. "We'll be about fifteen minutes late—"

"Is that with or without the time it'll take for me to look like a presentable human being?" Abby grabbed a hand mirror out of her backpack and meticulously brushed through her dark hair.

"I'm sorry, do you want to get in trouble?" Rose glared at her.

"I'd rather be five minutes late and not look like a rat."

Kate remained silent, her hands shaking as she pulled a bundle of clothes out of her backpack.

Cayla yawned, sitting up in her sleeping bag and rubbing her eyes. "Ugh, Abby, we're camping, it'll be fi—"

Her voice trailed off. Her green-eyed gaze locked onto Kate, horrified.

"Are you okay?"

"What do you mean?"

Kate forced a shaky smile, but it clearly did nothing to reduce her friend's worry.

"You're...really pale." She looked like she was choosing her words carefully to hide her panic. "Are you alright, Kat? You look like someone told you you were going to die today."

"Cayla!" Rose snapped.

Abby bit her lip. "I mean, she's not wrong. But I always look pale in the morning—"

Cayla shook her head. "Okay, fine, sorry, that was ...a bit too much," she said quickly. "Seriously though, Kate, are you—"

"I'm fine," Kate replied instinctively, then checked her words. "I mean...sorry. Nevermind. I'll tell you later."

Cayla frowned, her face a mixture of suspicion and concern. "No, you don't look well, Kate. Is this about yesterd—"

Kate shot her a death glare, and Cayla flinched away from her. Rose and Abby exchanged confused looks, but thankfully didn't ask any questions.

Cayla sighed. "You know what? Never mind. I don't know why I asked; I'm sorry."

An awkward silence hung as the girls completed their morning routine. The walk to the firepit was miserable. Kate's gut clenched, and she avoided eye contact with other students. She would have given anything to curl up in a corner with a book and pretend like none of this had ever happened—the nightmare, the hallucinations...but no matter how much she wanted it, she was here, this was happening, and she couldn't stop it. She sighed and rubbed her forehead, nursing a slight headache. After wanting so badly to go on this trip, she was counting down the minutes until the agony would be over.

When the girls reached the firepit, a cluster of students were gathered around a tall wooden pole, attached to which was a paper sign with the hastily scribbled words:

Connor Lake student camping trip canceled due to predicted bad weather. All parents and guardians have been contacted. Until your parent/guardian arrives, please return to your campsite, pack your things, and be prepared to leave led by your teacher-chaperone.

Kate and the others had to shove aside several people to get a clear look at the words. Rose frowned. "'Bad weather'? My mom checked the weather report yesterday morning; it's supposed to be sunny all week."

Abby rolled her eyes. "In case you were unaware, weather reports can change."

"Yeah, but to go from sunny all week to stormy all week in a day?" Rose squinted, adjusting her glasses. "Seems a little...unlikely."

Cayla kicked a stone on the ground. "Right, Rose. They would totally contact everyone's parents and put up a sign that said the trip was canceled as one big prank. There's no way a weather report can change that quickly."

"I never said that!" Rose snapped. "I said it was unlikely. Kate, you're smart, you believe me, right? ...Kate?"

Kate hadn't blinked throughout the exchange, her gaze focused on something in the trees. She could have sworn she saw...

The sound of her name brought her back. "What? Oh. Uh. Yeah." She couldn't shake the feeling that her dream hadn't fully faded.

Her friends exchanged worried looks again. "I'm fine," she added quickly before any of them could ask any more questions. "I just...didn't expect this. I guess we'd better go back to camp and pack up."

Abby glanced sidelong at Cayla. "Oh. Then this means Cay..."

Since the camping trip was canceled, this was their last time with Cayla before she went back to Canada.

"I'll miss you so much." Abby wrapped Cayla in a hug.

"Me, too." Cayla managed a bittersweet laugh. "Huh. It feels like we only just met."

"I know. I'm happy we met, though. I'll text you, I promise—"

"Ugh, stop being so sappy, guys."

Cayla laughed and released Abby, then smirked at Rose, who hesitantly pulled her into an awkward hug.

"It'll be weird not having our resident troublemaker here." Rose released her. "You sure you'll survive without me helping you with all your homework?"

"Hey, woah, slow down. Who says you can't do it over text?"

Ann rolled her eyes. "It'll be a little harder when we're not in the exact same classes. Besides, you have Kate."

"That's true." Cayla finally turned to Kate, whose frustration from their earlier scuffle melted away.

"I'll miss you—" Kate began.

That was an understatement if there ever was one, but she didn't get another word out before Cayla wrapped her in a bone-crushing hug. Kate didn't mind, though, as she returned the embrace.

"Let's head back." Kate released her friend. They shared a smile as the girls began to traverse the forest floor back to their campsite, albeit a bit sadly. The air filled with the chatter of students beside them. A bird chirped above them. A squirrel dashed through the tree above, rustling its thick leaves. Leaves and acorns crunched beneath their feet as they strode along the dirt path.

A gentle breeze sifted through the surrounding branches. Kate closed her eyes, relishing the breath of fresh air—the sun was beating down on her and it didn't help being surrounded by a suffocating mass of students.

The breeze grew into a strong wind. Kate shielded her face with one hand, then glanced around and noticed no one around her was doing the same. The earth trembled, and her feet swayed beneath her.

The rain started falling, shrouding her surroundings in thick darkness, and the trees shook...

But this time, she was prepared. Kate knelt before her knees could collapse, closed her eyes, and took deep, measured breaths. It's not real. It's. Not. Real. It's all in your head... The panic clawed at her, but her way of pushing it away seemed to work until she heard the voices.

Darkness gripped her as she recalled the dream. She swallowed hard, squeezing her eyes shut even harder, rubbing her temples. They didn't speak coherently like they had in her dream, just the mindless babble she always heard during her hallucinations. Stop it...

Now they sounded...Distressed. No—terrified.

What were they afraid of?

What did they want from her?

"Kate! Kate!"

Her eyes flew open. The voices and the rain vanished to reveal Rose shaking Kate's shoulders desperately, her eyes wide with fear.

"Are you insane?" she panted, her face flushed. "Run!"

Kate glanced around her, and her confusion was quickly replaced with horror.

Is this real?

Kate sprang up frantically, praying it was another nightmare as the students surrounding the four of them erupted into chaos, dashing in various directions: into the walls of forest on either side of the trail, back towards the fire pit, back to their campsites, anywhere to seek shelter from the earthquake. It felt like the Earth was in a rage.

Kate screamed and ran after Rose and the others. The four of them sprinted into the forest, crouching and grabbing tree trunks for support as the ground's trembling grew even stronger. Kate could hear teachers shouting orders in the distance, but to no avail. She squeezed her eyes shut, trembling and trying to take deep breaths, but her chest tightened and they came out shaky now that she knew this was real. How long did earthquakes last?

A minute passed, and Kate finally dared to open her eyes. A human-shaped shadow loomed over her.

Things blurred in her memory—the shocked and panicked face of a dark-haired boy. A scream from one of her companions. The feeling of a salty liquid being forced down her throat before everything faded into blackness.

Student Name: Kaci-Alissa Campbell

Grade: 8

School: Home school

Title: Les Pieds

Category: Poetry

Key: Silver Key

Educator: Kali-Nicole Campbell

People tell me I have beautiful feet,
I would slip on my pointe shoes, rise to the beat,
Dance on the tips of my toes,
The feeling's so neat.

People tell me I have strong feet,
I lower to demi-pointe, one leg in passé,
Push myself back up,
Relishing the pain.

People tell me I have narrow feet,
A certain pointe shoe fits them perfectly.
It squeezes my foot, just to keep me safe.
Pointe shoes should be tight; like tugging vines.

People tell me I have fast feet,
Foot comes in, back out at the speed of lightning,
Rise up, in a flash, focus your eyes on a point,
Dance is so enlightening!

People tell me I have wonderful feet,

The shape of my foot in my pointe shoe is an arch,
Like it should be; step on a straight leg, pirouette and land,
Finish, pause, back to the start.

Student Name: Helen Jiang
Grade: 7
School: SpiderSmart Learning Center of Bellaire
Title: Mr. Scribbleface
Category: Science Fiction & Fantasy
Key: Silver Key
Educator: Yan Hou

Peeking through the window, his curiosity turned to cold horror. “No” he murmured, the bitterness he wore on his face softened as he gazed at the two figures. “No,” he muttered. Henry’s frozen heart suddenly started to thaw. “Mary-ann.” In a daze, he walked to the front of the building, pulled by an invisible alluring force. “Mary-ann...Johnny?!” His heart raced as his voice rose several octaves higher. “Yes,” they answered simultaneously in a strange eerie voice. Soft and musical, like the last dying breath of a labored child.

Both their eyes were glazed with white and they were doused in a ghostly green aura. Johnny flicked as he stepped forward. Then his eyes cleared. “Father, come and stay with us, we can be together forever and ever! You promised to take me to get ice cream!” he stared hopefully at his father, tears about to spill out of his big brown eyes. “Remember?” Henry shivered. Of course, he remembered. That fateful day he had decided to treat his family to ice cream after finally saving up enough to afford it.

He had taken up extra hours, and after he finally saved up enough money to pay for rent and other necessities, he saved up money to treat his family to ice cream to celebrate his son’s 6th birthday.

Those were the days were it was a constant struggle to survive. But he was always happy. The joy that came out of being with his family kept him a happy man with no regrets.

Now, he was a billionaire, but he lived a life of no joy—for the light of his word had already gone out. It was ironic, really. He was once a man with almost nothing but the comforts of home. 40 years later, he held all the riches of the world, but all his joy had disappeared.

All those sleepless nights he spent alone, laying on his bed wondering why he was alive, why only he deserved to live.

Henry blinked. “Father come on! Join me, it’ll be just like back then.” “No... it can’t be.” Henry swallowed, trying to wet his parched throat, shivering from the cold horror of this scene. His heart thudded in his ears. He stepped back, ready to make a run for it.

“Henry.” cried Maryann. “Come with us, you’ll be happier, you know it.”

Henry's mind filled with warmth. He could no longer remember why he wanted to run anyway. How could he? He had been given such a golden opportunity. "yes... Yes... YES!" his thoughts were clouded with an unstoppable urge. Henry walked forward. His walking became a slow jog and then a run.

When he was only 2 feet away from them, the soft jiggling of bells filled his ears. Demons. It had all been an illusion, and now he was too close to escape. His fate was sealed.

Henry had heard stories of Demons, lurers who used people's deepest desires and memories to lure people in and steal their souls. 'Run' he thought 'Run!' But his body would not obey him.

All of a sudden he remembered the car accident. Shortly after the police escorted him out of the car, a demon had come to take away his family's dying souls. James had only gotten a glimpse of the demon's scribbled face, but its soulless eyes would forever haunt him. As he thought of this, the demon merged and returned to its normal form. 'It's him.' James thought. "Take me, I know you have them!"

"Mmmh. I like you, very well then, I will try to make your death quick and painless." Suddenly demon lunged at the man and ripped at his throat. Henry only let out on quick, primitive scream.

Student Name: Sarah Spalding
Grade: 9
School: J Mark Price's Reading & Writing Workshop
Title: Murder Mystery Party
Category: Short Story
Key: Silver Key
Educator:

"Drop your cellphones in the doom box please!" Alex cheerfully instructed, holding out a small rectangle covered in gray fabric with a small slit at the top. My phone clunked into the box, followed by two more, Rosalie and Nathalie's. Setting the box aside, Alex led us into his dimly lit dining room. Fake candles were spread out along the room, with mysterious-looking props and dinnerware at the six table seats. A yellow envelope sat on top of each plate.

"Come on already! I wanna solve a murder." Nick whined, already at his spot next to the head of the table. "Girls have no sense of urgency when it comes to trying to use their thinker thingys."

"Well, at least I have a 'thinker thingy'." Nathalie retorted, sticking her tongue out as she sat next to him.

I sighed, sitting next to a blushing and uncomfortable-looking Max, who jumped as a loud bang echoed through the space. The six of us quieted, turning our attention to where Alex was leaning at the head of the table, a fork stabbed into the table by his hand.

"Tonight," Alex paused for dramatic effect, "We are trying to solve a murder." Another pause. "Which one of us is the martyr..." another pause.

"Don't overuse those pauses," Nick warned, taking a sip from his water. Rosalie watched, across from him, as his eyes squinted at the cup. He shook his head out, turning his attention back to Alex.

Alex rolled his eyes, swapping his mysterious tone for a duller one and speeding up his speaking pace. "Will be discovered eventually." He turned to Nick, arms crossing. "Is that better for you?" Nick nodded, a smirk dancing across his lips.

"Open the yellow cards on your plate. They will tell you everything you need to know about the character you will be playing tonight." Alex instructed. Nathalie opened her mouth, but Alex cut her off. "And before you ask Nathalie, no, I have no idea what any of the cards are. My brother helped with the boring stuff."

"You mean you bullied your brother into doing the boring work for you," Nathalie added. Alex shrugged as we each tore into our envelopes.

"Careful not to get a papercut, Ry," Rosalie looked at me just as my index finger scraped against the corner of my card. I hissed, shaking my hand out. Rosalie sighed, shaking her head.

"Everyone memorize your cards to the best of your abilities. Once the game starts, try to avoid looking at your card." Alex suggested. Just as I had closed my card, the lights flickered and went out, plunging the room into an impenetrable darkness.

"Turn the stupid lights back on!" Nathalie shouted.

"I got it," Rosalie grumbled, already sounding like she was out of her seat. Seconds later the sun exploded in the room. Max yelped as I threw my hands over my eyes. Surveying the room after lowering my hands, my gaze landed on Nick. He was slumped in his chair, eyes closed.

"Well, I think we know who died," I commented.

"Yeah. Nathalie. I'll sure miss her humor tonight." Alex joked.

"Nathalie?" My face scrunched up, "No, Nick."

"So two people are dead?" Max questioned.

Alex shook his head. "Only one person was supposed to die. And I made that clear to my brother."

Nathalie's eyes opened, her mouth dropping down. "My card literally said nothing but PLAY DEAD, so..."

"Lemme see your card. We can reshuffle them after this." Alex gestured for Nathalie's card. She handed it over and he turned towards Nick. "You too Nick." Nick's eyes stayed closed. He didn't move.

Alex sighed, walking around the table to stand next to Nick. He crossed his arms. "If you don't say or do something I'm going to tell everyone your crush."

Nick didn't reply.

"This isn't funny, dude." Alex's hands punched Nick's shoulder, his tone losing its humor. Nick slumped further into the chair. "Nick. Come on. Say something."

The room was deathly quiet as we waited, even the wind outside holding back its whoosh. A minute passed with no response. Then another.

Alex frowned, leaning over and studying Nick. Placing a finger against the side of Nick's neck, he yelped, jerking his hand back as if struck by lightning. Turning to face us, his mouth opened, then closed again and he glanced back towards Nick. Nathalie tripped over a chair behind her, falling into Rosalie. Her face twisted in disgust before turning white, eyes widening. Rosalie's face looked distant and cold as she helped Nathalie regain

her balance. As she caught my eye, she bit her lower lip to stop it from wobbling. Max had taken a step forward, as if trying to get to his friend. His hands were shaking as he placed them in the pockets of his black hoodie, his face now almost as pale and yellow as Nick's.

"We. Are in the same room. As a dead. Body." Nathalie processed. Alex nodded slowly. Max shook his head.

"This is a joke, right?" Max questioned, looking around at us. "Like maybe Nick switched himself out with a mannequin to make it seem real, and Alex knows this, so he's just playing along."

"No. No." It was Alex's turn to shake his head. "No one except my brother knew who was going to fake die tonight. We can go ask him about it right now." Rushing towards the door, Alex placed his hand on the handle and pulled down before shoving forwards. The door didn't budge. Alex shook the handle, yet nothing happened.

"We. Are locked. In the same room. As a dead. Body." Nathalie tweaked her earlier statement, her voice getting breathier as her eyes widened.

"No way. Alex has to be kidding." I reasoned.

"I'm not. Why don't you try, use that softball strength you've got." Alex stepped aside, motioning to the door. I pulled the handle down, shoving my shoulder into the door in an attempt to get it to swing outwards. Something heavy rattled on the other side of the non-moving door.

"Okay. We might be locked in the same room as a dead body." I panicked.

"TRE!" Alex screamed, banging his hand on the door, "LET US OUT! THIS ISN'T FUNNY!"

"Wait, so you did plan for the door to lock?" Max questioned, realization lighting up his face.

"No! No! I planned for the lights to go out, but I specifically told my brother not to lock the door and wait in the dining room for us!" Alex defended himself, speaking quickly. "Anyone have their phones?"

"No." Nathalie replied bitterly. "You made us put them all in 'the doom box.'" Alex groaned, shoving his shoulder into the door again.

"Come on," he muttered. "Come on, COME ON!" Slamming into the door one last time, he bounced back, falling into a stoned-face Rosalie.

She took a breath. "Anyone good with lock picking?"

"I am," Max stated, shrinking back as we all turned to look at him, "But it won't do us any good. There's something blocking the door from opening."

"If we had our phones right now, we could call someone," Nathalie deadpanned.

Alex placed a hand on his hip. "You think I did this?"

"No one in this room is ruled out." Nathalie reasoned.

"So technically, you're saying that even though you're accusing me, you could've been the one to kill Nick."

"Yes." Nathalie shrugged, before her face bunched up, "Wait. No."

"Good Lord," I muttered, rolling my eyes. "Innocent until proven guilty, y'all."

"Yeah, Nathalie," Alex stuck his tongue out. Nathalie returned the gesture.

"I agree with Nathalie." Max spat venomously, pointing a finger at Alex.

"It wasn't me!" Alex cried, flinging a finger back at Max, "If you're so quick to pin it on someone else, it must be you! You've been awfully quiet!"

"And you've been awfully unsurprised," Max shot back. "I didn't even want to come to this party!"

"Yeah, but Nick pressured you into it. I bet-" Alex stepped forward, his hands balling into fists.

"BOYS!" Nathalie roared, shoving a hand in front of Max to stop his advancements towards Alex. "There's a field outside where you can bite and maul each other, but until then, focus on GETTING OUTSIDE OF A ROOM THAT IS STARTING TO SMELL LIKE A DECAYING CORPSE."

"Actually," I coughed, "autolysis only begins after about four to ten days." The room went silent.

Rosalie clapped her hands together, directing our attention to her "Can we please focus on getting out of here? Because that's still a dead body."

Surveying our ragtag group after a deep breath, Alex took control. "Alright, y'all. I think that if we all push the do-" He paused, eyes narrowing at the bottle of Rosalie's jacket. "Rosalie, what's that bottle in your pocket?"

Rosalie's eyes widened, her hand scrambling to hide it, speaking panickedly. "It was some-some headache medicine."

Alex gestured for the object, "So, you'll have no problem letting me see it?" Rosalie's face was gradually losing color as a shaking hand turned the vial over to Alex.

I yanked the bottle out of his hand, holding it up to the dim light of one of the fake candles. A slimy, greenish tint layered the bottom of the vile. "How did Nick die?"

“No sign of injuries and his skin has an unusual yellow tint: Poison.” Alex evaluated Nick, gagging and looking away.

Both of us turned back to Rosalie, Alex’s face distorting as the world swam unsteadily around me, spinning along with the coldness of betrayal leaking over my body. Max placed one hand on my elbow, helping me stay upright. “Did you poison Nick?” Alex’s voice shook with anger.

Rosalie steeled her expression, fists clenching and unclenching. “Yes.”

Max’s arm wrapped more securely around my waist as I stumbled back into him. Rosalie, my best friend-

Max took a step in front of me, becoming a shield as he continued to hold me up. Alex advanced towards her, his look of betrayal covered by rage. “You better have a good reason for killing our friend.”

Rosalie lifted her chin despite the panic in her eyes. “I do.” She closed her eyes, swallowing. When they opened again they were glowing white. “This might feel weird,” She explained.

I tripped backward, the support of Max’s arm disappearing, falling hard onto withering grass behind me. Grass...

I looked around, standing at the bottom of a hill. The sky was black, blanketed in heavy clouds and a thick layer of ash. “Guys, I’ve got a feeling we’re not at Alex’s house anymore.” I coughed, inhaling ash. Silence greeted me and I spun around twice. “Guys?” I was alone. My voice became breathless, as I panicked, tears beginning to line my eyes. “Max?”

Breathe. A voice whispered into my head. It sounded like Rosalie. It is Rosalie. I’m a psychic and I transferred you into a vision. This is why I had to kill Nick. This is the future if he hadn’t been killed.

“Everything is just...nothing!” I exclaimed.

Rosalie sighed. Top of the hill.

Whipping my head up, I squinted my eyes against the sudden gusts of wind. Upon the peak, stood an older version of Nick, black hair grown out and blowing in the wind as he surveyed the land below him. His eyes passed right over me, like I wasn’t even there.

Nick’s eyes stopped somewhere behind me and he nodded, taking steps forward. Gracefully, he slid down the hill, using his shoes like skies. He strode past me as he reached the bottom, stopping in front of a man. I jogged closer, eavesdropping.

“-said it was ready.” I caught the end of Nick’s sentence. His voice was deeper, a warrior’s stoic drawl.

"It is." The man responded. His face was sunken in and pale, eyes dark and shadowed with a scar stretching from the left corner of his forehead towards the bridge of his nose, hair ashy and gray.

He handed a leather bound book to Nick. Nick smiled, eyes locked onto the object as he reached out and took it into his hands.

Nick looked up. "Thank you, Alex." My eyes widened, hand flying to my mouth. This man couldn't be Alex. There was no carefree tilt to his lips, no smile wrinkling the corner of his eyes, or slightly gelled, blonde hair swept "naturally" to the side. This man looked half-dead, nothing like the friend I had known since I was six.

Nick continued smiling at Alex. "Your use to me has expired."

Alex's eyes widened, his cracked lips falling open. "Nick? What?"

Nick's expression didn't change as he gripped Alex's wrist and whispered strange words. Alex's mouth gaped as his skin began to turn to ash and crack into tiny pieces, floating away on the wind. Once Alex was completely gone, Nick turned away, remorseless. "Goodbye, old friend."

Nick flicked his hand in the air, a table appearing. He set the book down, and with another flourish of his hand, the pages fluttered open. Nick studied the page, a dangerous glint dancing in his eye. When he began to mutter under his breath, too low for even someone standing right next to him to hear, his eyes lightened, becoming a glowing and swirling silver. The dust, sand, and ash, scattered beneath his feet, picked up and began to swirl and blow around.

Any fascination I had dissolved when a hand pushed its way up from the dirt. I screamed, scrambling backward and falling onto the grass as several more hands appeared, clawing at the dirt around them, pulling themselves up to reveal a decaying forearm, then a bicep and a shoulder, on and on until hundreds of zombies were standing around Nick.

When Nick finished chanting, each zombie dropped to one knee, bowing their head. Nick was reactionless, even as his voice boomed.

"I have called you here today to aid me! Together we will take back what is rightfully ours, destroying those who crushed us like ants." At this the zombies lifted their heads, cheering. Nick's gaze traveled amongst the undead at his feet before he turned, his gaze landing on me, staring directly into my eyes. "No one and nothing shall be spared."

I stumbled backward with a gasp, hitting a warm body. I released a small shriek, jerking around and almost falling. Max caught my arms, "steady."

"That-was-" Nathalie stuttered.

"SO COOL!" Alex shouted, fist-bumping the air.

Nathalie cringed. "Insane." I nodded, agreeing

"What was that?" I questioned, my attention returning to Rosalie.

"A vision."

"But, Nick had...magic," Max pressed.

"And a dead Alex," Nathalie added.

Alex crossed his arms, shaking his head. "Oh wait, I forgot about that. Not cool."

"Yes," confirmed Rosalie, nodding "I told y'all. I'm a psychic. If Nick wasn't stopped, that's what his future looked like, what our future looked like."

Rosalie's face was tight, like she was holding tears back as she spoke. Alex's brow creased as he attempted to process all this information while Nathalie was nodding as if she understood every word. Turning my head to the side, Max was staring at me. His warm hand brushed mine, looping our fingers together.

"ALEX COBALT!" An angry, feminine voice rang from the hallway as a clang sounded. The 5 of us remaining jerked around. "WHAT DID I TELL YOU ABOUT THROWING PARTIES WITHOUT PARENTS?" The door was thrown open as we stood petrified, revealing an angry Mrs. Cobalt. She evaluated our pathetic group, shaking her head. "Kids, call your parents. Apparently, I need to have a talk with Alex."

Alex looked sheepish. "Bye, y'all. I would say thanks for coming but..."

"Yeah," I sighed. "I was supposed to go home with Rosalie."

"Oh?" Mrs. Cobalt looked perplexed. "Did she leave early? I'd be happy to give you a ride home, Ryan." Perplexed, I turned to where she was once standing.

She was gone.

Nick's body was gone too.

Max squeezed my hand, his voice was comforting. "I'd be happy to drive you back? I was supposed to drive Nick too, but maybe not now." I turned towards him, nodding and trying to control my breathing.

"Nick?" Mrs. Cobalt interjected, turning her attention back to Alex. "I didn't know you had a friend named Nick." Alex's eyes were wide and surprised.

"Oh-h. I don't think Alex w-would. He's my brother's friend? And just needed a ride?" Nathalie lied. Max nodded enthusiastically.

"Alright," Mrs. Cobalt agreed slowly, "Do you need a ride back, Nathalie?"

"That's okay," she cringed, "I'll call my mom."

Max was beginning to lead me out of the room. “Thanks, Alex,” we muttered simultaneously, picking our phones out of the ‘doom box’, the name holding a new meaning.

“Anytime, y’all!” His voice, like the smile and wink he gave us, was strained. “See y’all Monday.”

“Sorry, Mrs. Cobalt!” I yelled as an afterthought as Max opened the door for me and we stepped into the chilly October air. I scrubbed my eyes as Max slid into the driver’s seat.

“Remind me never to go to one of Alex’s parties,” Max grumbled.

“Agreed.” I mumbled, slumping in my seat.

Pulling into my driveway five minutes later, Max unlocked my door. “At least we don’t have to worry about the zombie apocalypse!” He smiled sideways at me.

“At least,” I shrugged, pushing my door open. “Thanks.”

“Hey, Ry,” Max made me pause as I stood, shivering, hand on the door. He was still gently smiling at me. “If you ever need to call me and talk, my phone is always on.”

“Thanks. I’ll see you on Monday.” I mumbled, shutting the door and walking up to my dim doorway. Placing a trembling hand on the doorknob, I watched my fingers quiver. The coldness of the handle seeping into my hand helped ground me into reality - a reality where I didn’t know what was real and what was fictional any longer.

Student Name: Noah Chelius
Grade: 9
School: Emery Weiner School
Title: Not a Hero At All
Category: Science Fiction & Fantasy
Key: Silver Key
Educator:

I never wanted to be a hero but was always expected to be one.

Since I was a kid, people have told me that I was special and that I could do something big. I didn't think much of it then. As a 5-year-old, the only thing on my mind was stacking all of the markers together in the biggest tower possible.

As I grew older, the people around me started to become more insistent with their demands. The first time the organization came to my house was in December of my 8th grade year. A group of people in identical business-wear came into my house without warning. I vaguely remembered some of their faces from birthday parties and holiday gatherings, although I had never known their names. They started talking with my mom, cutting furtive glances over to where I was seated on the couch. I simply stared back, wondering why they were disturbing me while I was learning quadratics.

A few weeks after that day, my mom sat me down in my room for a very serious talk.

"Honey, it is time for you to take up your destiny. You have incredible, dormant abilities that could make you the savior of our world."

"What chore do I need to do?"

"No, no chores! This is true! Do you remember those people that came over a couple of weeks ago? They are from a special organization that could help you access your potential!"

"I'm okay. I don't really want powers. Besides, I already have enough to do with midterms coming up." Little me left my mom staring speechlessly into space. She never could have imagined that I would turn down the opportunity to be a "superhero". Even being so young, I wasn't that stupid. They would make me a hero? Yeah, no. I would become a mindless puppet only to bring in money the second I agreed to have creepy strangers training me for world domination.

Fast forward to my sophomore year of college. I was studying various fields of chemistry and political science at the time. Up until now, The Organization, (how I referred to them since I had never received an official name), had continued annoying me about joining them. My answer was always no, even when they dispatched bio-engineered monsters

after me in an attempt to scare me, planted threats on my desk at school, sent briefcases full of cash bribes to my door, and mailed letters trying to guilt me into being a knight in shining armor. I did my best to not let these situations shake me and lead a normal life, but still, that was hard. Many times the corporation would recruit my peers to try to befriend me and then have them brainwash me or lead me to the big headquarters. Naturally, I developed a severe distrust of most of the world.

Anyway, during my International Politics class, a young man walked over to my desk and sat down next to me.

“Hi, I’m Leo, what’s your name? This is my first time in this class, do you think you could show me the ropes?” he fired off without breathing.

I had never seen this guy before, yet here he was trying to befriend me, just like all of the other manipulative people who wanted me to join their stupid organization. I glared at him, turned away, and ignored him, thinking that this would get him to leave.

Forty minutes later the chatterbox was still sitting next to me, completely unfazed by my rudeness. Who was this guy? Just how direct did I need to be to make him and his superiors see that I wouldn’t become the clandestine hero they wanted me to be? The bell finally rang and I jumped out of my seat and bolted to the door. Chatty McTalks-a-Lot chased after me, shouting at my retreating form to wait.

I finally reached the crowded cafeteria where I was sure he couldn’t find me, when I felt a hand on my shoulder and, sure enough, the student was still there, out of breath and grinning. “Dang, you can run fast! What are you, a superhero?”

My last nerve snapped. I shoved him hard against the wall. “I am NOT going to join your delusional, fantasized establishment. I am not going to be your money-making hero, destined powers be damned. Now go away!”

The boy blinked. “Hero? Powers? What?”

I gaped at his very, very confused face. Was he seriously going to play dumb? “Really? You can’t even own up to this level of manipulation? I want to live my life in peace, so go tell your corporation they can climb up a tree because I won’t ever agree to their fairy-tale land demands.”

He frowned a little, contemplating what I had just said. “Okay, I still have no idea what you are talking about, but is wanting to be your friend such a crazy ask? I was told you were one of the smartest students in the majority of my classes and wanted to get to know you. I’m new here, so I thought you could help me out,” he mumbled.

Does he seriously know nothing? If he doesn't, then does that mean he genuinely wants to be friends? My whole brain screamed warnings at me. This could turn out to be the battle of Troy with this rambling idiot being the Trojan Horse. Or, my lonely heart gushed, I could let him be a closer acquaintance. The army can’t do much harm if it can’t enter the

fortress all the way, right? "Fine." I released him- Leo- from the wall. "I'll help you with your classes, but we're not friends."

Leo beamed. "Okay! I got it. Just study buddies, nothing more." I sighed and walked over to the hot line with him following behind me like a puppy.

Over the next few months, we became closer. We spent time together outside of classes and I soon realized that we had become friends. He hadn't betrayed me yet, even though my foolish, lovesick heart had, so I let the interactions continue until, as we neared graduation, we had become something more than friends. I loved him. He was my joy, my life, the thing that kept me fighting.

The requests from the organization hadn't stopped at all. When I graduated, they sped up until I received notes multiple times per day. Leo tried to help me with the harassment but I told him that he should stay out of it. I didn't want The Organization to use him against me and I thought that as long as he never met them or gained their attention he would be safe. I didn't think they would go so far as to try and break my spirit. I was naive to believe all of this.

The tragedy struck on a night when Leo and I were walking in a quiet park with only a few people around. It was nice and I hadn't received any threats from The Organization that day, so my mind was stupidly at ease. There was no way anyone could have seen the explosion coming.

There was a giant blast from the ground in front of us and everything went black. When I came to, my vision was still slightly blurred but I couldn't find Leo anywhere. I dazedly stood up and began to search around for him, screaming his name until my voice turned hoarse.

I finally got to the center square where the ruins of a gazebo stood. On them was a figure clothed in a familiar black suit. They were holding something, something that looked like a body. My heart pounded as I stumbled towards them.

"Hey, what are you doing?" I whispered

The silhouette dropped the limp corpse onto the rocks in front of me. I fell to my knees, hands trembling as I wiped soot and blood off the face of my everything. Leo looked like a fallen angel, still radiant in death. I cradled him in my arms as the figure stalked forward.

"You were too weak to protect him. You should have joined us sooner," they hissed.

"You did this!" I screamed at the unfeeling murderer.

Suddenly sympathetic, they crouched down to my level, putting a hand on my shoulder. "Come with me and I can help you so you will never experience loss like this again." I shook my head, too numb to retort. The person sighed and dropped a card on the ground

next to me. "Here's our address, we will be there for you when you are ready." They left me and my love alone in the flames. Vaguely, I heard sirens screaming as I looked up at the unforgiving smoke and sky. Tears streamed down my face as my heart iced over.

I held a private funeral for Leo the next day. I thought I couldn't possibly cry more, but my shirt was still soaked by the end. After covering the coffin, I got up and hailed a cab. "Go to this place," I ordered, handing them the barely legible slip of paper.

When we got to the building, I laughed. It was just as I had pictured it, tall, modern, and sterile. I walked through the glass doors, past the shocked guards. The receptionist didn't even ask me anything, she just pointed me up the stairs, mouth wide open. I nodded and made my way up.

Once I got to the laboratory, I was greeted by a lady in a black lab coat. She gave me a short condolence before immediately leading me to a prep room. There was nothing else to be said. I knew what I was there for and so did everyone else.

After getting ready, I walked into a cold operating room and lay down on the table in the middle. A group of faceless "doctors" surrounded me and held up a large syringe. "This won't hurt at all," they lied as they injected me with the anesthetic. I blacked out after that.

When I woke up, I was wearing a high-tech suit, clearly meant to handle whatever powers I had gained. I didn't feel much of a difference but everyone around me stared at me like I was going to start preaching about a new kingdom come. I didn't and instead asked about my abilities. The same scientist, I'd first met guided me to a board room where a large slideshow was waiting for me. I sat and listened to her excitedly present about all of the incredible, destructive things I could do.

I then got up and walked out of the room, down the stairs, and out of the lobby. I turned around to face this hate-inducing structure full of people who had done nothing but cause me grief. I pointed my hand to the middle of the building and let out a fiery explosion. The whole building cascaded into rubble. I didn't wait around for the emergency responders. I already knew no one had survived. I spun away and walked into the shadows.

For the rest of my life, I became a name to fear, a villain. I never wanted to be a hero and I never became one.

Student Name: Yuna Lee
Grade: 10
School: Home school
Title: People of the Voice
Category: Critical Essay
Key: Silver Key
Educator:

"The people of these United States are the rightful masters of both congresses and courts, not to overthrow the Constitution, but to overthrow the men who pervert that Constitution" -Abraham Lincoln. ¹

On September 17, 1787, the United States established the idea of the "freedom of the people." We decided to take on democracy with the certainty that freedom was for the people, by the people, and of the people. The first sentence of the United States Constitution declares, "We the People of the United States." ("Constitution of the United States" Preamble)². It proclaims that this popular sovereignty was devoted to the power given to the people and not to rulers or powerful congressmen. It provides all the citizens of the United States the freedom to vote, express their thoughts, and have their own opinions without the fear of being persecuted. With that said, the greatest attribute of our democracy is the people. In other words, we use freedom to express our beliefs. However, having freedom is an understatement. The "free" in freedom is ours to direct. But what happens to the "free" in freedom when we the people decide it is not ours to oversee?

The freedom given to us can be dignified on a broad horizon. Freedom can mean many contrasting ideas to different people and can be of service in various ways. However, one thing for sure is that freedom is not a right. It comes with grave responsibility and needs responsibility to use it. When discussing the topic of freedom, being able to do whatever we desire for the good or worse comes to mind. In reality, freedom is much beyond that. It also comprises respecting one another and benefiting our nation as a whole. Also, freedom can't maximize itself if it doesn't have an intention or moral philosophy behind it. If people have the sole right to freedom but don't handle it with responsibility, it should not exist. Using our freedom to pursue unnecessary affairs harms all the hands of the United States. When parts of our society oppress the laws and create instability in our republic, they create a concatenation of events. It can make our country insecure and vulnerable to all world dangers, including foreign and domestic affairs. However, when freedom is in the right hands, it can help us. Our society can be valuable by using our voices and the resources we can reach.

By spreading any form of hate, participating in criminal activities, or taking away from others for power, we are making ourselves prone to vulnerability, the last thing a nation would want. It obstructs the beyond more crucial aspects needed for our country. There are wars, poverty, crimes, protests, and violence, yet we blind ourselves to the comfort of conventionality. Crimes and violence hurt our nation in ways unimaginable. They threaten the safety of citizens, strain judicial systems and law enforcement, and even cause unreliability of the teams who were supposed to maintain peace in our communities. As previously mentioned, these crimes can lead to instability in the United States as they break trust, create fear, and affect how other countries view us. From the perspective of others, when they see us struggling against ourselves, they would less likely desire to cooperate with the United States in future international relations. It damages our country's reputation, projection of power, and our economy as well.

As a nation, we must lead with logic and not our emotions. When we make decisions based on our emotions, the United States is more prone to far-reaching consequences than ever. We need to be logical when it comes to decision-making for all our well-being and the sake of the world. Thus, we must think judicially about foreign and domestic issues of our world and deliberately consider both sides of the trade-offs. For this to happen, we need to channel our freedom to contribute to positive changes in society. By promoting volunteerism and bringing together communities, we can also prove that we, the people have the strength to overcome those who pervert the Constitution by doing so. It's challenging and demanding to carry out such demands, but it takes a village to move a mountain.

As citizens of the United States, it is our sole job to protect ourselves if the leaders of our country take advantage. In recent years, people have showcased that we care about the nation in many ways possible: protests, social media, art, and music. Protests have been a popular form of stating feelings about current issues happening globally and for those who perceive that the government is not speaking for them. Recently, there have been numerous protests involving Palestine and Israel. Climate change, anti-racism, and school shootings have all been rising issues for protesters.

Another powerful tool just in arm's reach is social media. Many influencers and people share concerns and express their beliefs on different platforms. This has been an efficient way for citizens to share worries, especially for the younger generations. There have been countless viral movements on the internet that call for social change or criticize the government. Social media helps raise awareness of worldwide concerns and pressures government officials to take action.

Lastly, music and art have been another popular way citizens have raised awareness or concern. There have been a diverse handful of big songs and movies that recall social change. Again, various works of art support raising awareness for significant issues.

All the ways citizens of the United States of America expressed their voices out of concern in current years are demonstrations of the great strength of our democracy. Our government needs the help of our people, as we are what makes up the land of freedom.

Student Name: Kevin Song
Grade: 8
School: SpiderSmart at Sugar Land
Title: Privileged
Category: Poetry
Key: Silver Key
Educator: Sharon Li

The privileged
Possessing food and shelter
The biggest advantage known to man
Money and wealth
The majority
The flawed system of utilitarianism
Taking things for granted
Not appreciating
Not thankful
Americans
Europeans
The lucky
Not caring for
The unprivileged
3rd world
Diseased and
Plagued
The impoverished
Slums filled with the stench of
Rotting meat
Treasuring everything they get

Can't control the fact they were born

Into poverty

Like an ovarian lottery

The depressed

The grassroot level doesn't give and

Are too greedy

Taking things for granted

Like the creature

Ouroboros

That eats non-stop

An endless appetite

How can we sleep

When we know people are suffering

How is it that we can just

Drive by them

Everyday

The pain in our chests

We need to help more

Take less

Give more

take less

So that the disadvantaged

The deprived

Can live an equal, healthy life

Just like us

Student Name: Sarah Spalding
Grade: 9
School: J Mark Price's Reading & Writing Workshop
Title: Salem Burned
Category: Short Story
Key: Silver Key
Educator:

The Salem air smelled of burning flesh, desperate screams cleaving through the town. The young girl, held up by tight ropes on the wooden pole, couldn't be more than 13.

"I'm not a witch!" She sobbed, tears carving rivers down her face, voice raw and broken. Her knees buckled as she strained against the ropes. "Please! Let me go!" The priest only sneered, waving the burning torch closer to the girl's feet.

My eyes caught on Elenwen across the crowd, her bonnet pulled low over her eyes, dress bunched tightly in her fists. Her head lifted, revealing her usually grinning mouth set in a tight line. Locking eyes with me, she nodded firmly. I looked back at the girl, her eyes closed in acceptance. Gaze tinting black, I focused on the girl, allowing the curl of my hand to loosen the ropes around her. Her eyes snapped wide open, whipping over the townspeople. Next, my gaze traveled to the priest as I snuffed out the flames on his torch. He gasped, dropping the smoldering wood and stumbling back. As the rolling, smoking torch drew the attention of the priest and townspeople, Elenwen started towards the accused girl, pulling her bonnet even farther down on her head.

The priest cautiously approached the torch, eyes squinted. Once he began to reach down, I sucked in a breath, once again igniting the wick. Another horrified gasp rippled through the gathered people as the priest jumped, fists curling.

A shrill whistle cut my attention back to the burn stand. The thick nylon ropes laid in a heap on the ground; The young girl was gone.

Smiling, I pulled my own bonnet lower on my face, turning away from the crowd, heading towards the path carved into the forest.

Thirty minutes later, I met Elenwen and our guest in front of our 'safe house', a barn deep in the forest which Elenwen and I had converted into a makeshift shelter for the women we freed. This girl was our third rescue.

The girl was shying away from Elenwen, whose palms were out and raised. I hurried to them, the girl's eyes shooting to me. I stretched my lips into a subdued smile as I stopped next to Elenwen.

"I trust Elenwen told you what happened in the square?" I questioned, taking cautious steps toward the girl.

She nodded, gaze jumping between us, "You're both real witches? With magic?"

"Yes," I confirmed, "but we're not anything like the Church says we are."

"We don't want to hurt you," Elenwen added, "we just want to help."

Despite her quivering voice, the girl raised her chin, "Help how?"

"Hide from the Church," I stated. "There are two others that we've rescued and you'll be safe here with them. We have everything you need to survive - food, blankets, and water - until we find a new town where you can live safely."

"But-but- my family," The girl wailed, "How am I supposed to live without them? Will I ever see them again? What about my friends?"

Eyes widening, Elenwen glanced at me. The first two we rescued had been outcasts, living alone in the village, thus embracing their new lives easily. Elenwen looked back to the girl. "Would you rather we'd have left you to burn to death?"

Hesitating, the girl's mouth opened and closed. "Yes - no - I don't know."

"Look, you'll be safe here," I tried to comfort her. "We can get you anything you need. I'm sure you'll settle right in." Face falling, the girl nodded. "What's your name?"

"Catherine," she responded, quietly. "And you are?"

"I'm Sirena," I smiled softly.

"Elenwen," my friend greeted, flashing a smile and offering her a hand. Catherine eyed it skeptically before giving a shy wave. Brushing the gesture off, Elenwen turned to the barn. "Allow me to show you around." Catherine's gaze jumped around before she hesitantly followed Elenwen's retreating form. As they entered the doors of the rundown shack, I turned and began the short trek back to our coven's grounds, preparing to spin another lie to satisfy the elders.



Unfortunately, my carefully planned lie was unneeded. As soon as I walked into Grandmother's cottage, she pounced on me.

Sitting in an old, but wellkept armchair, she raised an eyebrow. "Rescuing more of the accused, Sirena?"

“No, Grandmother,” I sighed, shaking my head.

“Mercy would say otherwise,” she responded, referring to our coven’s gaurdian. “She spotted you and Elenwen using your magic in the square this morning to free a young human.” Biting my lip, I looked around the cottage, anywhere but at Grandmother’s furious gaze. “Anything to say, Sirena?”

“Fine, Grandmother. We rescued another accused. Happy now?” I spat, spine straightening.

My gaze was drawn back to my main caretaker as she stood. Despite being well over one-hundred, she looked as if she was in her twenties. “You know our rules. Do I need to remind you that you are not to use magic outside of our sacred grounds?”

“You need not remind me, Grandmother. I know our laws.”

“It would appear not.”

Shaking my head, I finally gave voice to the thoughts that had circled like vultures in my mind since Bridget, the first and only human I had cared about, was hanged. “Are we just supposed to let them murder innocents? What does that say about us, Grandmother? If we were given this magic, why shouldn’t we use it to do something good?”

“We will not risk our coven for strangers,” Grandmother chastised.

I scoffed, “It’s not like we’ll actually get caught. The priest is too caught up in his over-inflated ego and sense of God-given righteousness to actually realize it’s us.”

“Listen to me, Sirena,” my grandmother’s tone allowed no room for arguing. “If you, or Elenwen, disobey our rules, our laws, you will both be banished. For eternity. Am I understood?”

Glaring at a gray spider crawling along the cottage’s walls, I lowered my chin. “Yes, Grandmother. I underst-”

Holding up a hand to stop me, a parchment floated into Grandmother's hand. She frowned, eyes darting over the page. “The priest has called a meeting in Salem’s town square tonight with an announcement on the 'witches' and 'their activities'.” She sighed, tired eyes locking with mine. “I expect to see both you and Elenwen there early, on your best behavior.”

Nodding at the clear dismissal, I swept into my room.



Many long hours later, Elenwen and I, along with the other witches in our coven, stood scattered amongst the restless townspeople throughout Salem's townsquare. Elenwen and I stayed tightly together. Mercy stood close, keeping us on a tight leash, while my grandmother and the other witches stood scattered amongst the townspeople. The priest, standing haughtily on his raised platform, surveyed the people, eyes catching on those who eyed the new guards, placed at each corner of the platform, with nervousness. As the sun began its final descent and the half-wane moon illuminated the night, the priest began his address, the candles flickering by his feet in the rustling wind.

His booming voice carried through the restless quiet of the night, punching through the air. "People of Salem, allow your doubts to be settled. Witches live among us! Magic flows around us. The events at today's execution have proved that!" Elenwen and I chanced a look at each other. Maybe we weren't as sly as we thought we were.

"Look around you, citizens." The priest continued. "These witches may be your neighbor, your sister, your betrothed. They could be standing next to you at this very moment! Be wary! Be watchful!"

The townspeople around us shifted anxiously, heads turning as they analyzed those surrounding them, a renewed sense of distrust brewing.

"But don't fear, friends, for I have seen what we must do to protect ourselves. For the safety of our brothers and sisters, extra guards have been stationed and sent to patrol the town for witchcraft, and we are doubling our protocols surrounding the safety of the town. We WILL catch these monsters and they will pay for their sins."

Some townspeople cheered, raising their fists in the air, while others stayed quiet, continuing to scan the people surrounding them. Across the crowd, my grandmother caught my eye, giving me a stern 'we'll talk about this later look'.

Surveying the crowd with a sneer one more time, the priest stepped off the platform, disappearing into his large cottage behind. The gathered townspeople began to disperse, Elenwen and I lingering in our places, watching Grandmother track the guards with her eyes.

Elenwen's hand brushed mine. "We're going to be in so much more trouble now, aren't we?"

"Yep," I nodded, shoulder's tightening. "So much more."



Surprisingly, Grandmother's punishment was light; we were to spend a day cleaning our village, without magic. Elenwen and I had the job done in no time and were soon perched on a firm Blackthorn tree branch deep in the forest.

Elenwen sighed, rubbing a hand over her eyes. "We can't just stop rescuing innocent humans because it threatens us."

Leaning against the tree's trunk with a hump, I threw my palms out. "You're right, E. But, what are we supposed to do now? Grandmother's going to be watching us like a hawk."

The corner of my best friend's mouth tilted up mischievously. "Not if she doesn't know where we are."

I leaned forward, brows furrowing. "What are you saying?"

"I'm saying we sneak out."

"When?"

Elenwen hopped off the branch, skipping into the forest, back in the direction of Salem. "Now!"

"Now?" I spluttered, eyes widening.

Elenwen turned around, walking backwards, bonnet slipping to the side of her head. "Well, are you coming or not?"

Sighing, I scrambled off the branch, running to catch up to her giddy form. "I'll always come with you."



Elenwen skipped all the way to the town, keeping a steady conversation as I walked beside her. As we emerged from the canopy of trees into the airiness of town, both of our attentions were drawn to a guard stationed along the treeline. He stopped us with a wave of his hand, stepping to greet us. "What are you girls doing in the woods?"

"Oh, we were looking for snails!" Elenwen giggled.

My head snapped to her as I fought to avoid letting my jaw crash to the forest floor.

The guard apparently had the same response, brows furrowing as his tone became puzzled. "Be careful in there. You never know where the witches may be hiding."

"Of course, sir. We always are." Elenwen smiled. "I always check the snails for signs of witchcraft. My mother taught me how to do that."

Gaze darting above our heads in disinterest, the guard waved us along with a shake of his head, stepping back to the trees.

As we hurried away, I hissed to Elenwen, "Snails? Really?"

"I don't know!" She whisper-yelled back. "It was the first thing that popped into my head!"

I shook my head, laughing and gently shoving Elenwen. "This is one of the many reasons you're my best friend." Elenwen laughed too, shoving my shoulder gently as we moved deeper into the town. Our light, laughing mood fell away as we reached the town center, attention drawn from the large, gathered crowd to the older women, looking strangely familiar, tied to the wooden pole in the middle. I swallowed, tripping over my steps.

"Oh, you've got to be kidding me," Elenwen muttered.

Sharing a glance, the two of us blended into the crowd, slowly making our way to the center. Giving my hand a quick squeeze, Elenwen stepped away from me, pulling her bonnet down to shield her eyes, shield the view of her irises turning black as she cast her silent spell.

Her fist curled as she focused on the accused woman, ropes slowly loosening around her torso and arms. The woman's squeezed shut eyes quickly shot open, immediately landing on Elenwen and I almost as if she could sense our brewing magic. Her gaze felt like a brand.

"Witches!" She roared, "Witches in the crowd!"

The priest stepped closer to the woman, burning torch still in hand. "Where?"

Elenwen and I were already backing away as the woman looked towards us, voice dropping low as she gestured with her children. "There. The children."

"Run," I whispered at my best friend as we broke through the crowd, rushing back towards the woods.

"Stop them!" The priest order, voice booming through the town square.

The frozen guards sprung into action, chasing after us like hounds on a scent. Elenwen, paces in front of me, threw a look over her shoulder, eyes wide. "We have to shadow-walk!"

"WHAT? We won't learn that for another two years!" I panted, chancing a look behind me to see the guards closing in. "Stepping through shadows, all the way back to the village, without knowing how to, would be too dangerous! Just keep running! If we make it to the village, the spells around it will keep us safe!"

Elenwen nodded, throwing herself forward faster. Trying to catch up to her, I put all my focus into pushing off the ground with my feet and throwing myself forward, not paying

attention to the earthy elements around me. Tripping on a branch, I crashed down, tugging at my dress to free it from the root it had caught on.

The sounds of feet pounding came closer and I felt a hand pressing down between my shoulder blades, pushing me back down. I yelped, inhaling a mouthful of dirt.

“Sirena!” Elenwen shouted, feet skidding as she tried to stop despite the countless other guards closing in. Picking my head up, feeling blood and dirt trickle down the side of my face, I watched as Elenwen took a panicked step back towards me.

“RUN, E!” I screamed, watching her eyes fill with crystals and glance around. She released a sob before turning and darting deeper into the forest, pursued by two guards. I whimpered as my hands were bound tightly behind me, chafing ropes digging into my wrists. A gag was shoved into my mouth.

“No more spells for you,” The guard to my right growled, his booted foot landing a kick to my stomach, forcing me to curl into a ball. “Get up.” His hand pulled me up roughly, my shoulders twinging at the awkward angle. I stumbled forward over the uneven ground as the guard pushed me out of the forest and back towards the town.

The guard brought me to the cramped prison, throwing me into a small, underground cell, the smell of mildew and sound of dripping water assaulting my senses. He retied my hands to hang above me, looping the thick rope through a hook in the ceiling, giving a final sneer before locking the steel door.

Looking up and straightening against my restraints, I tried everything I could to break free, twisting my hands this way and that way to see if I could form a spell. I released a muffled scream as nothing worked, hanging limply.

I wasn't dangling in the cell for long before the guard returned, followed by the priest, whose face twisted in disgust as he stepped into the musty cell. After looking around, the priest's gaze landed on me, flicking up and down disdainfully. “So you're the one who's been freeing witches.” I didn't respond, couldn't with the cloth in my mouth. “And your friend.” My eyes squinted to a glare. “No matter. I'm sure you know your deserved death will be neither swift nor painless.”

Strutting back out from the cell, the priest nodded to the guard stationed next to me. He sprung into action, moving to retie my hands behind my back, pushing me towards the open doorway. Stumbling from the prison, I stared up at the stars, ignoring the wooden stand we were headed for. The guard forced me up the steps, roughly binding me to the pole with ropes around my stomach, ripping the bind out of my mouth.

Gazing at the night sky, my eyes shone silver with the light of the cratered moon.

I blocked out the sounds of the townspeople's cheers, the priest's speech and sneering, ignoring the people altogether. Taking a deep breath, I finally lowered my gaze, eyes catching on a small struggle in an opening of the forest. My eyes locked with Elenwen's

tearfilled ones as Mercy held her back. My best friend's chest rose and fell with sobs as I felt heat lick my feet. Mercy's mouth was moving, eyes tinted black and focused on me.

I swallowed, breaking my gaze away from Elenwen and looking back towards the sky, towards the endless blanket of velvet black. The flames began to lick up my skirt as I felt the heaviness from Mercy's spell, a sleeping spell, setting over me. I smiled, eyes slowly falling shut.

What a pretty night to die.

Student Name: Chloe Weng

Grade: 10

School: Margo Writing

Title: Sculpture

Category: Poetry

Key: Silver Key

Educator: Margaret Tung

Porcelain

you built me out of stone and white clay,
a sculpture carved by hands callused and gray.
with each touch you ingrained into me your love,
the way an artist loves their artwork,
the way a mother should love her daughter, adoring and pure.
you remind me every day what it means to be loved.

as you traced over the creases on my fingers,
with each fracture, the vise of your grip grew tighter.
when i asked you about it, you laughed,
the skin on my knuckles blossoming ivory white
as you squeezed into me your first lie:
how can you not be beautiful?
you're perfect, because i am your mother.

each time i see your face crumple,
somehow it cracks my surface a little,
the furrows of your skin forming like silk:
why does my breath catch every time?
why does my stone heart begin to pound,

the ringing in my ears start to resound,
when your eyes avert mine like it hurts to look at me?

you poked and prodded at my every flaw,
and i learned to feel your touches as if they were embraces,
basking in their honeyed warmth as if they were caresses,
savoring each syrupy drop of disappointment.

i learned, and yet somehow i still have
traces of dusty fingerprints imprinted
into the fibers of those uneven crevices.

where is my junior math olympiad qualification?
why can't my ninety-nines morph into hundreds?
why is it that my art is always second place?
why is my piano performance only good enough
to win merit, and not distinguished honor roll?
why can't i push harder, why can't i learn alchemy
to turn my silver medals into gold?

so feel free to sink your fingers into my body,
paste all the unattainable words you want on me,
carve me open with your scalpel,
make your incisions, dip into my blood,
fish the delicate marrow from my bones,
use it as ink and paint landscapes over me,
until i am enough for you.

remember when i was smaller, shorter than you,

before the crescents under my eyes began to shadow blue,
when you braided my hair and instructed me to
lift my chin up, straighten my spine,
seize all the opportunities and make them mine,
because you're worth everything, you said.
after all, you are beautiful,
and you're perfect, because you are my daughter.

you built me out of stone and white clay,
a sculpture carved by hands callused and gray.
with each touch you ingrained into me your love,
the way an artist loves their artwork,
the way my sculptor loves what belongs to her.
you remind me every hour of every day,
with every worry, every backhanded compliment,
every frown aimed at my blemishes and dents,
what it means to be loved.

Pores

your eyes brush the red lesions dotting my face,
over my forehead and down to my chin,
splattered like stray drops of vermilion paint
that have been spilled—an accident, a slip
of the paintbrush, a mistake.

your lips are pursed, tasting an invisible lemon,
a sour disgust embedded into the creases on your forehead.
have you washed your face this morning? are you sure?

what about last night? i could do a procedure for you
to remove your pores, or arrange to get your eyebrows waxed,
—then you would be so beautiful.

you would buy a blank-faced doll with empty eyes
and ask why i can't have its smooth porcelain skin,
its perfect symmetry, its unchanging figure,
because it is only a mother's concern for her daughter,
a painter rendering a portrait in the image of herself,
the ideal impression of beauty.

my fingers brush the red lesions dotting my face,
over my forehead and down to my chin.
to an artist, all colors are beautiful,
but i have never seen a hue as ugly as the pale poppy
flecked against the yellow ochre of my skin,
the rough ridges like dried acrylic lost on an oil canvas.

i don't have a picture-perfect, instagram-ready face.
i don't have straight white teeth, full pouty lips, shining hair,
wide eurocentric eyes of striking sky blue, clear pale skin,
a button nose, high sculpted cheekbones, or a model's body
that is stick-thin (but thick in the right places)—and so be it.

because that is not what makes me shrink from mirrors
and take a second look at the concealers arranged in the
makeup aisle that held no interest to me before,
and stare enviously at the girls who walk like they know they are

flawlessly photogenic, effortlessly gorgeous,
and doubt the fact that my very existence makes me beautiful.

because without your eyes prying my body apart,
without your lips pursed, your shame teaching me how to
hide my face and tuck it away, letting dust collect
in your cabinet of unwanted art pieces and failed paintings—
i can face my reflection in the mirror without flinching.

because i have never felt as ugly as when you're looking at me.

Student Name: Chloe Weng

Grade: 10

School: Margo Writing

Title: Shriveled

Category: Poetry

Key: Silver Key

Educator: Margaret Tung

when I was still made wholly of short, stubby fingers clinging onto
my parents' hands, and I had to look up to speak face-to-face,
in the quiet I would wait for the next time their voices rose,
harsh and demanding, to each other and to my small self,
scraping against everyone and everything around us,
and I would feel so small, so small, even smaller
than I was, back when I couldn't even decipher
what they were saying, back when I covered
my ears because if I couldn't hear them,
their arguing would dissipate into the
motionless air, like it never existed
in the first place, like I could
will it to disappear, and it
would be alright again,
back when I was still
hanging on by a
single flimsy
thread.

savoring my first bitter aftertaste of tea and thinking, I could fit
into this tiny teacup and I could shrivel into a passion fruit

seed, bursting with honeyed tartness, black and smooth
and encased in golden pulp and ever so small, even
smaller than I was, back when the aroma of fruit
tea was entirely unfamiliar to me, and I would
plummet and slam onto the ceramic ground
of the tiny teacup, not with an emphatic
thud, but with a muted chime, a soft
tinkle, an imperceptible clink, then
become so small that I would
not even feel the pain, just
rebound to the sky, only
to come back down
once more, and
bounce back
all over
again.

I would be unseen, unobserved, untouchable, if I could shrivel
down into that size, and I wouldn't have to be strong, I could
just become small, ever so small. and I used to be so
proud of it—look at how small I can make myself,
look at how I can occupy no presence, squeeze
myself into something whole: something
impervious to the surrounding world,
owning the ability to go unnoticed
forever, to fade slowly into the
the background as the noise
dies away, and I would be

something untouchable,
something invisible,
bruised fruit the
color of wine
oozing the
sweetest
juice.

I would let myself be drenched in the rain and no one would
offer me an umbrella, and I watched them all rush past me
as my body shivered in the cold, and I would shrivel up
inside, still not saying one word. I would morph into
the puckered skin of a prune, violet and wrinkled,
withstanding oily fingers prying me apart and
thanking them for the grease, watch oil swirl
on rainwater, unspooling into something
fractured. i was only the brittle skin,
i covered whatever was given to
me, all for teeth to sink deep
into my flesh, and i would
give, and never take.
don't you see how
obedient i was,
such a sweet,
submissive
child?

Student Name: Yutia Li
Grade: 9
School: J Mark Price's Reading & Writing Workshop
Title: Sirens
Category: Poetry
Key: Silver Key
Educator: Mark Price

"The Sirens sing the truth about what you desire." – Annabeth Chase

Step counter: 0

According to the rusty clock hanging on the cafeteria wall, eight minutes and 17 seconds have passed since I began my staring competition with the lunch line exit. When you finally appear in the doorway, lunch tray in one hand and can of Snapple in the other, you're right by Michaela's side.

I watch, unmoving, as your eyes follow hers to the far right corner of the cafeteria. I'm sitting on the other side of the dining hall at our usual table, far from the reaches of your gaze. Maybe you just don't see me.

Liv! I call. Livie!

Your head doesn't turn. Maybe you just don't hear me.

Michaela's pristine Nike Dunk lifts off the ground, planting a few feet right from where it started. Yours follows. The moment your sneaker lands, I begin to count.

Step counter: 1

They say we're entering the treacherous waters. Here, the sirens sing louder than ever. Beware, they say. Plug your ears. Steel your mind. If you don't, you'll be their next victim.

We laugh at their warnings. We're special, we say. They can't sway us. We sail straight into the infested waters, heads up and eyes ahead, not knowing how wrong we are.

Step counter: 2

Remember when they called us Smiles Squared? Did Smiles Squared go to the concert last night? What does Smiles Squared think of Jenna's new boyfriend? What's Smiles Squared giggling about now? Remember when all we did was drink in the magic around us, hand in hand, with grins bigger than ourselves?

Step counter: 3

The moment we enter their territory, their songs drift up to our ears. The music turns my head, but I don't budge. It's beautiful, you say, walking over to the railing.

Step counter: 4

I walk into the cafeteria on the first day of school to see your water bottle where it shouldn't be. It's the orange one, the one decked out with those neon vinyl stickers we picked out together on Etsy, perched on a table far away from our usual one, out of place among several pastel-colored Hydroflasks. I frown, scanning the cafeteria as I weave my way to our usual table— the one with two parallel scratch marks running across the surface, perfect for two best friends. As I begin to unpack my homemade pork dumplings, you exit the lunch line with Michaela and Annison and Lydia. You sneak a peek at me, smile, wave, and continue walking. My hands hover over my chopsticks.

Step counter: 5

Remember when you joined my class in January of first grade, when you were just that innocent farmgirl from Kansas, new to the city, with a spring in your step and stars in your eyes? Remember when you stepped onto the school playground for the first time? How you tossed your jacket to the side and sprinted for the monkey bars as I, bundled in a pink coat, chased after your tinkling laugh, shivering yet enthralled?

Step counter: 6

You peer over the ship's railing, look back at me, peer over the railing, look back at me.

Step counter: 7

Two weeks have passed since school started. We've sat together at our table a total of three times.

I'm just trying to branch out, you tell me. Let's face the real world. We need more friends than just each other.

I nod slowly. But we're still besties? Smiles squared for life?

Oh yeah. Your mouth smiles, but your eyes don't seem to.

Only after you walk away do I realize you never pinky promised.

Step counter: 8

Remember how we turned to each other and never looked back? How we crouched by that majestic oak in your front yard as I drizzled cinnamon and honey in a lopsided ring across the ridged bark, chanting fairy-summoning spells aloud? Remember how the edges of your mouth curved into that twinkling, dimpled grin as you absorbed my maniacal energy? How I sighed maybe this potion won't work and you cut me off with a wink and a yes it will?

Step counter: 9

So any birthday plans? I fall into step alongside you as you hurry out of history class. It's the fourth week of school. Birthday plans? You glance behind you, to your left, to your right. I mean, not really. I'm just gonna go out and eat with my family. I don't think I'd have time for much else. I shrug and smile. Makes sense. Yet it doesn't. We usually start planning for your annual sleepover bash weeks in advance. But then again, the teachers have ramped the workload up a notch in seventh grade. I swallow the cold lump creeping up my throat. That's why. It has to be.

Step counter: 10

One moment, you're standing by my side. The next, you're not. I hear the splash before I see it.

Step counter: 11

It's your birthday. The moment the school doors open at 7:30am, my feet follow a mind of their own. They carry my body by the front desk and past that receptionist with a frozen smile, through the gray tiled hallway and up the west staircase. The locker numbers climb and climb, blurring in what seems like time lapse and slow motion at the same time in a reel I'm merely watching. Until we hit 252. I watch as my hands twist your locker dial, tucking the whipped soap set they brought you among the streamers and confetti someone else scattered atop your binders yesterday. My feet step back. What am I doing?

Step counter: 12

Remember the high dive at the pool? How you, refusing to let me see the water below as the swirling monster I believed so firmly in, grabbed me by the wrist and dragged me to the edge of the wobbling board made for one and one only? Remember how our feet lifted off the fiberglass before the lifeguards could blow their whistles, your fingers lacing tighter around mine, dissolving the scream at the tip of my tongue, as the world around us fell away in midair?

Step counter: 13

Your figure slips beneath the waves, your body nothing more than a rippling shadow.
They want you. You want them. I jump in after you.

Step counter: 14

My feet glue me to the floor by your locker. Only when you appear, three silhouettes by your side, can my body move. Happy birthday, my mouth whispers. My arms embrace you. The silhouettes stop in their tracks. My arms lock tighter. You squirm. My arms don't let go. You wriggle out of my grasp. One silhouette whispers something to another. The words slumber and invite seep through my ears. My feet won't budge. It's just you and me. Two stones in a river. One's lodged in the silt. The current sweeps the other away.

Step counter: 15

I can hear the music, but I can't listen. All I can perceive is your shadow, slipping further and further into their territory.

Step counter: 16

I don't blink when I see your Snap story at 8:02pm. Silhouettes crowd around you. Michaela. Annison. Lydia. The four of you gaze at a cake topped with an aflame 1 and 3. The dam within me topples. Floods pour from my eyes, waves of throbbing hollowness battering and battering and battering my heart as I lock my gaze with yours, the stars in your eyes shining like they used to around me.

Step counter: 17

Remember that promise we made to each other on the bus ride home one sunny spring afternoon? How we vowed to never let go of each other as long as the world remained safe from zombies and fireballs? Remember curling your pinky around mine, the stars in your eyes shining brighter than ever, as we nodded our heads in affirmation at the same time? Do you remember, Livie? Do you?

Step counter: 18

A red blur tints the edges of my vision. Your figure spirals deeper still, murky silhouettes closing in around you. I try to gurgle your name. As oxygen escapes my lungs, hope does too.

Step counter: 19

I stop by your locker this morning as you're pulling out your Dior Lip Glow Oil. I feel like I haven't seen you in ages. You swivel to face my voice, your eyebrows raised. I smile. You wanna catch up at lunch? We can play never-have-I-ever like the good old days and— Sure, you interrupt, grinning. Your face freezes. Your teeth shine too white, your mouth suspended in a boxy curve that screams a silent distance that never existed between us before.

Step counter: 20

You'll meet me at our table? I ask your blank face. Sure. Your mouth doesn't seem to move. Promise? I reach for your hand, slipping my pinky into yours. Your palms are too cold, too rocky to be your real skin. I guess, you whisper. You shake your fingers loose and turn back to your locker, rolling your gloss brush over your lips again. And again. And again. Until you've used up all the sparkle.

Step counter: 21

The scarlet veil before my eyes grows darker by the second. The silhouettes twirl round and round, like unfurling silks, shrouding your shadow from my view. No, I call as the waves lift me, arms and legs suspended, away from you.

Step counter: 22

I should've listened to their warnings before we set sail. I should've stuffed your ears full. Tied you to a post on our ship. Held your hand as we sailed through their waters. So you couldn't heed their songs. So they couldn't drag you under.

Step counter: 23

All I can see is the back of your body. I eye your plaid skirt. The fabric swoops from left to right, like a swishing veil, revealing your pink Lululemon shorts underneath. Maybe you'll end up in detention for your skirt length. I doubt you'd care, as long as Michaela's there too.

Step counter: 24

I stand on the ship deck, alone, eyes locked on the patch of water where you went under. Dark outlines dance deep below. You're not coming back, are you?

Step counter: 25

If only you'd glance behind you, at the kid with a face full of acne slouching, alone, at the lunch table with two parallel scratch marks across the surface, staring at her beat-up Skechers that used to carry her from her house to yours.

If only you'd ponder those severed ties and shattered memories, your lying laughs and laughing lies.

If only you'd gaze into my soul, the stars in your eyes shining brighter than ever, and pinky promise me we could be Smiles Squared again.

Student Name: Elizabeth Taboada
Grade: 11
School: Catholic Literary Arts
Title: St. Michael's Sword of Justice
Category: Poetry
Key: Silver Key
Educator: Norson Fernandez

St. Michael's Sword of Justice

St. Michael, shield my wounded soul, I plead,
From wicked daggers of fallen ones;
I pray your holy sword will intercede,
To rout blasphemies that escape their tongues.

The devil's legion is unmerciful,
To heave our warriors to inferno;
The injustice seems irreversible;
We must slash the wicked for eterno!

St. Michael, save the souls of our great nation!
My soldier who resembles God our Lord,
Defend our people with your flaming sword.
Archangel, lead our force to salvation!

Unlike the devil, our souls do amend,
To reach eternal freedom in the end.

Student Name: Elizabeth Lei

Grade: 11

School: Home school

Title: Static

Category: Flash Fiction

Key: Silver Key

Educator:

Sunlight filtered through the trees, casting eerie shadows on the white car. He checked the GPS monitor- five more miles. Up ahead, the road stopped, melting away into a blanket of leaves. Sighing, he got out of the car and began the trek on foot, boots crunching with every step.

Finally, he reached the house. The boards, once white, were now stained a green-gray color. A circle of dead trees surrounded the house, their branches entangling with each other to form a canopy over the roof. Next the house, a swing set swayed gently in the breeze, the red seat crimson against the dead gray of the surroundings. Despite its abandoned appearance, he felt a strange sense of familiarity. Walking up the porch steps, he knocked on the door.

"Police, open up. We're here to help you."

No response. He tried again, louder this time. There was only the faint whisper of the wind. He glanced at the boarded-up windows, but he couldn't make out anything past the thick wooden slabs. Carefully, he opened the door.

"Mrs. Jones?" He slowly walked through each room in the house, calling the woman's name. She had called 911, claiming her burglar alarm had set off. There was no one. As he turned to enter the living room, he startled. A young girl stood in the middle of the room. In a flash, his hand went to his gun. She tilted her head to the side, mouth curving, but her smile didn't reach the cold glow in her eyes.

"Who are you?" His voice trembled. The eeriness of her presence seeped into the air, and he shivered involuntary.

"Hello Officer Roy," she took a step closer.

His breath caught in his chest. She was wearing a bright pink dress dotted with flowers, the color unmistakable.

"You're wearing- you're wearing her- that dress," he shook his head frantically. "We found your body in the river. You're Cassandra Keller."

She laughed, the echo terrifying. "I am."

"You died ten years ago. I was one of the officers on your case. How-"

"But you never found my killer." Turning toward the back door, she glided outside, toward the forest that lay behind the house. Desperate for answers and convinced that he was hallucinating, he followed. Kneeling down in a clearing, she brushed away dead leaves to reveal a door in the ground. He stood from a distance, watching in dazed fear.

"Let me show you my killer." She breathed something over the lock, opened the door, then slipped in.

Almost mindlessly, he followed her in, the door closing behind him with a click. The darkness was oppressive, the air musty and warm. One step, two steps, three steps. His breathing quickened. His heart pounded. This was never going to end. Something fell on his hand, almost making him scream. Oh god, it was alive. He brushed it off, shuddering. How much longer? One step, two steps, three steps.

And then the sudden jolting realization that he had come to the end. There were no more steps. A bright light turned on. Standing before him was the girl. Under the fluorescent light, her face glowed a sickly white, her smile unnaturally wide.

"You want to know what happened that night? You think you deserve the truth?"

She stepped closer to him. He backed away, desperate, fumbling for his walkie talkie.

"I was a helpless girl. Everyone in my life took advantage of my innocence." With each word, she crept closer to him. "But you did nothing to help me. You gave up so easily, and I was left to rot. To rot alone!"

"No, no, no," he cried. "I tried, I did everything I could."

"Lies," She began chanting in a high pitched unearthly tone. "I got my revenge on my killer. And now you, the one who let him get away, must pay for your sin now."

Instantly, she was on him, shrieking and snarling.

"No," he gasped, pressing the button on his walkie talkie. "This is Officer Roy, I need-"

"Say again, Officer?"

Nothing but static.

Student Name: Ethan Li

Grade: 10

School: SpiderSmart at Sugar Land

Title: Texas Contribution to Southern U.S. Hurricanes

Category: Critical Essay

Key: Silver Key

Educator: Sharon Li

Texas' Contribution to Southern U.S. Hurricanes

The wind howled, the windows rocked, lightning cackled, and the sound of rainfall reverberated throughout. My grandmother and I huddled in a closet, expecting the worst. After what seemed like hours, the storm let up, and we felt safe temporarily. This was a scene out of Hurricane Ike, a deadly storm that killed over a hundred people and caused billions in damage. Another, Hurricane Harvey, which made landfall in August of 2017, flooded over 204,000 homes and displaced more than one million people (Amadeo). Hurricanes are not uncommon along the Southern Coast, especially in Texas. Over the past decade, these superstorms have only gotten worse due to global warming. As the nation's number one carbon emitter, the State of Texas needs to allow more renewable sources of energy to flourish, as greenhouse gasses have been proven to increase the severity of tropical storms which cause billions in damages and displace millions. Currently, the government is attempting to stifle renewable energy projects, which doesn't paint a pretty picture for the future.

Warmer oceans mean stronger hurricanes. Warmer ocean temperatures cause more water to evaporate, feeding tropical storms (Barlow and Comargo). As sea surface temperatures rise, they are bolstered by the warmer water below the surface, causing a compounding effect. Hurricanes feed off of this phenomenon, and grow stronger as they near land. In the case of Hurricane Harvey, the loss of heat in the Gulf of Mexico matched the release of heat by the storm. Similar trends were observed in other devastating hurricanes like Irma and Maria (Cheng et al). In Texas specifically, the United States Environmental Protection Agency finds that Texas has warmed about one degree Fahrenheit. In the eastern two-thirds of the state, the average rainfall is increasing and hurricanes and storms are becoming more intense. It also finds that over the past 50 years, the amount of rainfall during the wettest four days of the year increased 15% in the Great Plains and hurricanes have become more intense over the past 20 years (United States Environmental Protection Agency | US EPA). According to Tom Knutson, senior scientist at NOAA's Geophysical Fluid Dynamics Laboratory, models show that warmer oceans increase a

hurricane's wind intensity and storm surge (Colbert). This means that for hurricanes that their rainfall levels will soar as time progresses and they will bring more flooding and devastation to the communities that they rampage. Texas' impact on hurricanes is simply irrefutable, as the Gulf of Mexico remains a hotspot for the formation of tropical storms. Indeed, recent storms have steadily upped their ante in terms of rainfall with Florence in 2018 dropping 35 inches in some areas and Imelda 44 inches in 2019. A graph by the EPA shows the energy rates of storms have been exceeding the normal energy output in the last decade ("Hurricanes and Climate Change").

The damages done by hurricanes to the U.S. over the past four decades have totalled over two trillion dollars, with the costs of the last five years being one third of that figure ("Hurricane Costs"). This increased unemployment rates in Texas and Florida and wrecked their economies. Not only do hurricanes impact economic activity, they are also detrimental to mental health. A survey conducted from a sample of survivors of hurricane Harvey showed that 46% of residents displayed probable PTSD symptoms (Douglas). Harvey also inundated 800 wastewater facilities, spreading toxins into flooded areas, and dropped 60.5 inches of rain compared to Katrina's 20 inches (Amadeo).

So is the future bleak for Texas and the rest of the Southern Coast? Despite Texas' being synonymous with oil and natural gas, the status quo paints a different picture. In fact, Texas is, surprisingly, the largest producer of carbon-free energy in the U.S, and large companies and startups alike are flocking to Houston, one of the state's largest cities, pursuing eco-friendly projects (Worland). This may seem like a great feat until it's revealed that only 28% of the state's energy comes from renewable sources (Heager). Fossil fuels and coal still dominate the state as its primary energy source. The reason behind the lack of renewable energy is simple: politics. Numerous state officials are against the wave of new startups flocking to the state. Some fear that they will harm the fossil-fuel industries that have dominated Texas for so long. One bill creates special requirements for renewable-energy products, and the state has banned certain financial firms from using environmental metrics (Worland). Two bills, House Bill 820 and Senate Bill 505 create new steps and extra fees to register hybrid and electric cars (Taft). Another bill, Senate Bill 2627, would loan oil and gas corporations 10 billion interest free for the construction of environmentally unfriendly power plants (Tomlinson). It is clear the Texas government is outright opposed to allowing renewable energy to gain ground, as many policies show.

Some scientists have argued that if human-caused global warming is occurring, there are less costly ways to address the issue rather than making governments impose carbon dioxide regulations. In the context of Texas however, this is not relevant, as the State of

Texas' role would not be to manage carbon dioxide levels directly, but to allow businesses centered around green energy to prosper. The laws that the State has passed have clearly hindered these businesses' long term goals to create a sustainable environment. If these businesses were allowed to flourish, carbon dioxide levels would decrease naturally.

Global warming undoubtedly affects our environment every minute. In the state of Texas, excessive carbon dioxide emissions from the fossil fuel industry propels this phenomenon. As heat-trapping gasses accumulate in the atmosphere, oceans warm and destructive hurricanes ensue. These deadly storms cause billions in damage and kill thousands, with many more being displaced. As Texas emits the most carbon dioxide out of any U.S. state, it is paramount that the government unleash the potential of numerous green energy businesses to reduce the severity of tropical storms and to better the environment overall. It's clear that Texas legislators do not want carbon-based industries to decline, and that is precisely why action is needed. As citizens of an ever growing and beautiful state, it's time to protest these harmful laws and protect the environment. Otherwise, tropical storms with unfettered growth will decimate the region and cause neverending harm. Thinking back to that fateful day inside that closet, it brings me security that people are actively attempting to limit the effects of these deadly hurricanes.

Student Name: Ariel Yu
Grade: 7
School: SpiderSmart at Sugar Land
Title: The First Note
Category: Poetry
Key: Silver Key
Educator: Sharon Li

The First Note

Is that note A?

No, it's B

Wait

This is bass clef

Not treble clef

Oops

It's C

I should focus

Who knew June

(the one by Tchaikovsky

not the month)

Could be so hard?

My hands hurt and

Mom says it sounds good

But if my own mother said it didn't

I would be scared

The black and white keys

Are blurring together

Why am I playing
On a gray slab of concrete?

I need a break.

I can now play
Both hands together
For the first and
The second page!

It sounds exactly
Like Lang Lang
(my mom disagrees
but she's wrong sometimes)

I'm amazing

I'm terrible

I've gotten
The fifth page down
It's the last page
Shouldn't it be
The hardest?

But I still can't do

The third page

With both hands

I hate this

I love this

It only took

Forever

But I did it!

I mastered June

And all I need to do

Is master the other months

(also by Tchaikovsky)

My mom wants

To record me

And I agree

I do it beautifully

First try

No mistakes

And it is

Perfection

I'm so ready for recital

I'm not ready for recital

But it's too late

I'm here already

I'm next

And my dress is itchy

And that strand of hair

Will not stay

Behind my ear

And what was that note again?

I want to leave

I can't leave

It's my big moment

And if I leave now

Then I'll have to wait

Another six months

To do this again

I'm getting it right

Right here, right now

No matter what

I curtsy

My smile is shaky

I can see my mom

Sitting in the front

Already taking a video

That will go into her

Computer and

Stay there forever

I sit down onto the chair

Scoot it back a bit

It squeaks

Loudly

I try not to cringe

I fail

It doesn't matter

I take a deep breath

And I play

The first note.

Student Name: Sophie Da Silva
Grade: 10
School: Girls Write Now
Title: The Golden Shovel is Never Buried
Category: Poetry
Key: Silver Key
Educator:

The Golden Shovel is Never Buried

after Gwendolyn Brooks and Terrance Hayes

Last Friday after I dyed my hair red, we
saluted our tiny adobe and went to the real

big city where the cool
kids smoke in corners. We

couldn't tell our brother, the right hand to our left.
But she knows. Ma knows we skipped school

and she's sad about our fate. We
walk fast past the soft shadows that lurk

behind alleyways and almost jump in the bus too late.
There's only room at the back of the bus where we

watch out the window, a mother strike
her screaming son, a blow to the head. He's not straight.

He runs down the street, magenta jacket in hand, and we
think of our father, the words of praise he used to sing

to our brother before he knew he was gay, his mortal sin.
Since then we've stayed silent and said nothing as we

watched him grimace at ma's thighs when they weren't thin.
We hid behind the door, his knuckles bloody, gin

on his lips, ma's legs blue and purple. The bus stops and we
left at the curb. The seven dollars from my pocket jump into a jazz

player's case. My only allowance gone because of June's
big eyes and gullible heart. Store doors invite us in but we

rather kneel at the sight of glass buildings and watch the brown leaves die
as the perfect people pass by. June whispers, That'll be us soon.

Student Name: Katherine Liu
Grade: 11
School: Margo Writing
Title: The Skinny on Body Neutrality
Category: Journalism
Key: Silver Key
Educator: Margaret Tung

In the fifth grade, I reveled in challenging the boys in my class to arm wrestling contests—partly because it was a low-stakes way to pass the time during after-school care and partly because I knew that I could win. I was a dedicated swimmer who had hit her growth spurt early on, so I towered above most elementary schoolers in both height and weight. It was here, at the ripe old age of ten, that I received the first remark about my body. Gesturing to my biceps and then comparing them to my male opponent's, one boy commented, "Wow, look at the size difference!" These abrupt observations continued into high school with my friends' occasional comments—"Your arms are so large!"—and my immediate urge each time was to hide my arms in the closest baggy sweater.

Yet sometimes I allow myself to forget about my body image. I still swell with the same pride when I can beat a boy at arm wrestling in high school, now that they have all hit puberty and reclaimed their strength. In those moments, I'm willing to flex for my cheering friends, unconcerned with how unfeminine my biceps may look. Regardless, my feelings are always extreme: rapidly vacillating between pure pride and pure shame. I've never thought neutrally about my body, because I never knew that it was an option. Like other people my age, I struggle to look past the media's blinding emphasis on body positivity and the fog of my own self-doubt. Although schools have taken on the responsibility of teaching children about the guidelines for a healthy lifestyle and the perils of substance abuse, there is little time set aside for age-appropriate discussions of mental health, such as those revolving around body image. Moving forward, schools should introduce the concept of "body neutrality" to their students in health and development classes, to offer a peaceful armistice in the polarized conflict of self-image.

Centuries of art offer a record of how the ideal body standards of women have changed. For most of human history, sculptors, painters, and cartoonists have preferred voluptuous, curvy women to feature in their works. Small, pear-shaped clay statues from tens of thousands of years ago depict a shapely Venus, the Roman goddess of love and beauty. Even at the beginning of the twentieth century, artists like Charles Gibson drew caricatures of tall but curvaceous women to demonstrate the absurd expectations of the period. However, beginning in the 1920s, American media suddenly shifted towards broadcasting skinny, waif-like women as exemplars of beauty and fashion. With this change in beauty standards came a massive rise in eating disorders as women tried to

match their appearance to the likes of Coco Chanel and Clara Bow. The popular mindset was that women must actively try to achieve a particular look by implementing dieting and exercise into their lifestyle.

These standards persisted for almost a century, even when several movements from the 1960s championed anti-diet rhetoric and railed against fatphobia. Most notable among them were the National Association to Aid Fat Americans (now the National Association to Advance Fat Acceptance) of New England and the Fat Underground of California. Inspired by the civil rights movements happening across the country at the time, these groups shared their desires for equal treatment, advocating for their causes both in media and in public demonstrations (“From New York”).

After the introduction of social media, many of these groups shifted online and gained a larger mainstream presence. Advocates urged for a more inclusive discussion of body types, emphasizing intersectionality with Black feminism. This idea was embraced by digital influencers, especially in the 2010s, who began increasingly pushing for acceptance and love for a wider range of body types. Within social media, it became commonplace for people to share pictures of themselves, announcing to the Internet that their body, no matter how it looked, was deserving of acknowledgment and appreciation.

However, the body positivity movement has become increasingly controversial. Among the criticisms is the lack of representation in today’s “#BodyPositivity” community. Although the movement was originally founded by queer, black women, a large majority of the posts today feature white women instead. Even more astounding was that under half of these posts actually shared pictures of larger bodies. There is a disproportionately low representation of BIPOC, queer, or disabled individuals (Griffin et al.). Rather, body positivity is now claimed by people whose bodies were celebrated to begin with, and seems to be marginalizing the original founding groups once again.

Studies are still unclear about whether seeing body-positive content even helps a viewer’s self-image; some indicate a brief improvement in body image, while others show no response at all. What actually seemed to matter was whether a person’s close friends and family demonstrated their appreciation for that individual as a human being, outside of their physical characteristics. These studies agree that seeing content about body positivity increases a viewer’s awareness of their own body and causes self-objectification, which is precisely what modern-day society should focus on eliminating.

Moreover, influencers’ calls for body positivity have been accused of forcing a mindset of “toxic positivity” on young women (Swami). Denying individuals the right to think negatively of themselves forces them to hide their negative emotions, possibly even translating to decreased emotional expression in areas outside of body image as well.

Body neutrality offers a compromise. This phrase was initially popularized by Anne Poirier, who first created the Body Neutrality Workshop in 2015, and then espoused by performers like Lizzo and Jameela Jamil. This novel mindset focuses on appreciating the

functions and capabilities of a human body, rather than its physical appearance—or granting the freedom to not think about one’s body at all. By using objective phrases such as “my body allows me to move around,” instead of emotionally charged words like “my body is ugly” or “all bodies are beautiful,” body neutrality aims to teach people to acknowledge their authentic feelings—whether positive or negative—while realizing that there is no need to change themselves.

But cisgender people have the luxury of at least appreciating their bodies for choosing the right chromosome. On the other hand, many transgender people may see their birth-assigned body as an inaccurate representation of their true identity, and experience an overwhelming wave of gender dysphoria upon any mention of their features (Crane). For transitioning people, body neutrality may be an elusive goal. The best solution for many trans people seems to be gender-affirming care, relying on hormone replacement therapy, or, for those who can afford it, surgery. But those who are unable to receive the desired treatment have no choice but to live with their current body and try to see themselves as a person unlimited by how they appear. In the end, body neutrality is merely a suggestion toward society, arguing for each of us to forget how we look on the outside and focus on the defining internal characteristics of a human being. One possible consequence is eliminating the pressure on transgender people to present themselves exactly how they feel, as more people understand that bodies hold no indication of who we are.

The first step in shifting society’s perspective would be to introduce body-neutral ideas in schools, allowing young children to understand that their body acts as an outlet of expression for their ideas and emotions. Teachers, with whom children spend the majority of their time, could begin to issue simple verbal warnings when their students describe themselves or others with subjective adjectives, akin to their relaxed reminders about cursing. In health classes for middle and high schoolers, schools can introduce the words “body neutrality” explicitly, and teach students about nutrition and exercise to maintain the health of their body, rather than how it could cause a visible change. By slowly sharing the message of body neutrality, society can begin to learn the value of taking a step past physical characteristics and delve into the more objective scientific facts instead.

Even with an eye toward objectivity, humans naturally categorize the world they see into varying levels of beauty. I expect that someone in the future will again decide that the size of my arms does not meet their standard and will comment. I know, however, that my arms are there to help me brush my hair and pull myself through the water and especially beat the occasional challenger at arm wrestling. And as more people realize that body neutrality offers a safe space for them to ignore others’ sporadic judgments, society can reject both the false positivity and the harmful negativity that we associate with our physical appearance.

Student Name: Annabelle Peng
Grade: 9
School: SpiderSmart Learning Center of Katy
Title: The Teletransporter Paradox
Category: Science Fiction & Fantasy
Key: Silver Key
Educator: Jayden Flynn

"She looks the exact same," I murmur, dropping my head onto Yuhai's shoulder. He's been waiting even though I was the one who called. "Exactly the same," I repeat.

We sit on the grassy floor near the park, overlooking the flashing lights of the rest of the world. The artificial sky begins to fade from scarlet to black and the two of us watch as the lights in each building shut off as people drive home. How long has it been since overtime became shunned and buildings were blacked out for the night? And yet my father still remained absent for each minute of every day.

"You know how I told you about—well—that thing that my father's been obsessing over? Well," I laugh stiffly, "he managed it."

I think about the straight black hair, skinny arms, the small face, and even the mole in the little girl's left eyebrow. All the little details that I could only see in a family picture.

I'm seized with an urge to abandon all self-restraint, seized with an urge to explain in rushed words over how I heard the door open from upstairs and how her rosy voice floated upstairs, a sound I'd almost forgotten. How rotten of a brother am I?

I want to talk about the way that when my father gave me strict rules on what I could say to her when he'd bring her home, I didn't believe that he'd actually be able to create her—that I still assumed it was his strange way of coping. I want to talk about how my father jerked me to the side to scold me on my stiff reaction and the way I just ran and found myself here and how I called him because I didn't know what else I should do, but I already hear how miserable and pitiful I'll sound.

I'm unsure if Yuhai really understands but after a while, he asks, "D'you need to crash at my house again?"

"I can't."

"You don't have to go back to your house if you don't want to. We've known each other since forever. My parents are fine with it."

I flop on the ground and turn away. I hear him join me a moment later, both of us lying in the waving grass.

“When I get back home tomorrow, I’ll get in trouble. Plus, I didn’t bring my stuff and there’s school tomorrow.” I sigh and squeeze my eyes shut. “God, I really don’t want to go.”

“We can skip,” Yuhai offers, nudging me, “we already know everything anyways.”

I want to laugh, but I shake my head and mumble a half-hearted response. I don’t feel like trying to struggle against the current only to be hit by a log racing down river later.

I breathe in and it feels like I’m underwater. I grasp for any other topic. “Why do they make everything so humid down here? I mean, man couldn’t control the Surface when it was still habitable. But like—they built this frigging place. They should stop making the weather so... insufferable.”

“It’s ‘cause they want it to be like the Surface because that’s what the past generations are used to. Y’know, before we went underground. But it’s not like they can exactly replicate what it used to be, so they try to mimic behavior.”

“Bro, just let me complain about something. We’re not in school.”

Yuhai taps my hand and then gives it a squeeze. “Is... she real? Living? Cells? Is she still sick?”

“Not still!” I sit up and turn towards him. My voice cracks and I feel crushing waves smashing against the walls of my stomach. “That’s—that’s not my sister. She’s not Lumie.”

“I know, I know.”

Is she sick?

We sit in silence. I watch the sky darken second by second, each blackening pixel building a block of dread.

“Sorry,” I dip my head and scratch the back of my neck, “I just...”

“It’s okay.”

His tone is so casual and gentle, I almost miss the pity.

“No, seriously. I shouldn’t have.”

Yuhai cracks a smile and then grabs my shoulders to make me fall back again. “If you’re really sorry, treat me to a frappuccino or something.”

We laugh and snort and start to talk about homework and tests, and while half of me relishes the break of tension, the other seems to detach and drift away until it’s as if I’m staring at myself from afar.

Should I be angry or sad or happy?

I only recognize that I have to leave when we notice that the Sun has completely disappeared from the horizon. Yuhai tells me that I can call or text him whenever.

This is wrong. What my father did. Lumie deserves better. She does. She deserves rest and peace, and excluding my father, don't I deserve closure too?

When I walk onto the driveway, I realize that for once, the house is bright, with the lights turned on and vibrant noises coming from inside. My eyebrows furrow when I realize that the door is unlocked, and I hold my breath as I step in and slip my shoes off.

"There you are." The Doctor doesn't even look up.

Both he and the little girl sit at the dinner table, covered in warm light and surrounded by all assortments of food, their chatter temporarily halted by my arrival.

Chills shoot down my back as my eyes fixate on Lumie's now occupied seat. I hesitate and under the Doctor's glare, walk to my chair, eyes glued to the floor and furniture.

It's as if my sister was frozen in time while we all aged.

I wasn't always close with Lumie since she was sick and away from home, but is she going to be replaced like this?

The clone straightens and brightens as I take my seat.

She opens her mouth to speak, but closes it when the Doctor scoffs, "Nice of you to come home after running off so rudely earlier."

I pick at my food and muster enough courage to glare at the edge of the table. In the corner of my eye, I watch the little girl begin fidgeting anxiously. She's nothing like Lumie, who always seemed confident.

"Lumie, how do you like the food? You might still have some trouble tasting after coming out of the hospital. I made your favorite, remember?"

The girl shrugs a little and pokes at her food. She refocuses her attention on me.

"Rion, do you have any candy?"

I stiffen.

The Doctor interjects, "Lumie, eat healthy--"

"What did you just call me?" I interrupt. Goosebumps prickle across my skin.

The two stop. The girl, under the intensity of my stare, begins to stammer.

“How did you know my name?”

“Lumie,” the Doctor clears his throat, “will you leave us for a moment?”

The little girl scurries off.

“Do you have to be so difficult?”

I drill holes into the table with my eyes, but feel my heart begin to pound.

“Didn’t I talk to you about this yesterday? Don’t confuse her.”

“What do you mean ‘out of the hospital’?”

The Doctor sighs and rubs his face.

“You haven’t been listening to anything I’ve said, have you?”

My stomach squeezes. “I didn’t think you were actually gonna-”

“What?” He snaps back. He stops, glances around, and then drops his voice to a hiss.

“Thought I couldn’t do it? I am the most prominent scientist in the Underground. There’s nothing I can’t do.” He points at the direction the clone went off to. “That little girl has all of Lumie’s memories, an exact copy of her cells. That is Lumie.”

I feel like choking. “She doesn’t even act like her.”

“You’re still focused on that? You know,” the Doctor’s voice becomes dead calm, “your concern is really over the Teletransporter Paradox. Imagine a teleportation machine that can scan your body down to the molecular level. It deletes your current form and at the destination, the machine recreates an identical copy. Not only organs, but memories, thoughts, and all. Isn’t that copy essentially you?”

“It’s—”

“It is you. As for her behavior,” his words speed up, “how would you know? You ran out earlier. You haven’t even talked with her.”

“That—”

“I admit though, she doesn’t behave the same way. So what? You don’t think people can change? Who’s to say Lumie wouldn’t act like her at one point if she was still alive? Who’s to say that she won’t begin to act like Lumie later on? Don’t be so narrow-minded.”

“I—”

“I assumed you would’ve been happy to see your sister. Did you never wish that she was still here? You never thought that you would do anything to see her again?”

“I did,” my words rush out, “but that’s not the point. That’s-that’s just not her.”

“Why isn’t she?”

I can't find anything to say.

The Doctor seems done with the conversation and resumes eating.

"Is she sick?" I swallow.

"Well," The Doctor's tone is lighter, even humorous, "I suppose it's not all of her cells. Of course we removed the tumor. Or else, what's the point?"

I almost jump when the little girl comes to greet me at the door after coming back from school. A recently hired nanny watches from upstairs.

A pleasant artificial Autumn wind, void of the previous day's humidity, slips through the door and blows her familiar hair in all sorts of directions. I can't stop myself and stare at the strands, caught in a momentary daze, imagining a world where Lumie never had to undergo treatment and one where the home wasn't gloomy and lonely every night.

Jeez I must be tired to be thinking about this.

"Rion!" Her voice is quieter, a stark contrast from Lumie's when she was here.

She searches for a topic of conversation. "Candy?"

It takes a second to register. I shake my head.

All of last night, I worked up resentful thoughts, wanting to be furious that she's thrown everything into disarray, needing to create an outlet to release emotions that have been pent up for so long, but it's impossible. She's a child, and has Lumie's small structure and her worried eyes and why is everything like this?

"Why do you want candy so much?"

"It's been so long." She fidgets nervously. "I remember it tasted nice too."

"I don't have any, but I can check the pantry for you."

I set my stuff down and walk over. I search, and my back is turned when she quietly speaks, "How are my friends? Do they miss me?" Her next words sound even smaller.

"They're probably much older now, huh?"

I halt, just as my fingers close around a Snickers. Technically, Lumie is dead. Of course my father wouldn't explain all the other social complications. As of now, it's homeschooling and hiding until the Doctor can find a way to forge adoption papers or something that could excuse her existence.

She's a child. Living, breathing. Is she really happier than I? Did she really ask for this?

A warm, sticky feeling begins to spread through my bloodstream. My ears flush and I swallow.

"All your friends missed you a lot." I step out of the closet and hand it to her. "How does it taste?"

She chews, thinks, then softly chirps, "It's not as good as I thought it'd be."

"Really?"

"Nope. When is Papa coming home?"

I hesitate and then shrug. "Who knows. Now that you're home, he might come back around six."

"Don't tell him, but I didn't really like the food yesterday."

From upstairs, the nanny calls Lumie to finish studying.

I try not to react to Lumie's name.

Before she can head back up, I stop her. "Wait. Sorry. For lashing at you yesterday."

"It's okay."

"You sure?"

"Yep."

"Wait, Lumie." I breathe in and smile gently. "What do you say we give you a nickname? Like Mimi?"

"Isn't Lumie short enough?"

"Well, my name is Aerion, right? But Yuhai and you and everyone else call me Rion. It's fun."

"Okay," she agrees slowly. "It sounds pretty."

"It does."

As I watch the back of her small figure go up the stairs, the world seems a little lighter.

The Doctor sits on the couch in the living room, blankly staring at the files in front of him. The house is dark and the papers are barely lit by a small lamp. Upstairs, his children are sleeping.

Aerion, The Doctor muses to himself, most likely has his door closed and locked. What a difficult child, but at least able to manage himself. Almost like a cactus. The Doctor chuckles.

As for his daughter, she'd be a dried flower between the pages of a book, delicate but sweeter nevertheless. His beautiful creation in more ways than one.

For a moment, he's still half in a daze. Then, jerking back to reality and gritting his teeth, he throws his papers away from him.

Thank goodness that he has a well secured private life to do what he wishes. Otherwise, he might as well be bored to death! Now that his personal project has finished, what excitement has there been in his life? No thrill, no challenges, no fervor at all! The current work on the Underground and species preservation and whatnot, is that really important enough for him? And by being forced to run his solutions for this work through the government, any work he's been doing will all just go to waste. When have any of those politicians not kicked the can down the road?

He inhales sharply and lets his mind wander again. Excitement...

He could try bringing back his late wife. His first cloning project has proved to be excellent, but... his wife passed too suddenly and he hadn't thought to take any living cells from her he needed for reference.

The Doctor pauses. Was this cloning project really excellent? For example, how is it that after a week of successfully waking and bringing her to life that she still hasn't begun to act according to his expectations?

In fact, everything was lacking. Liveliness, vitality, wittiness.

The Doctor sighs. It's not too late to recreate Lumie again. He could reuse the clone's healthy living cells. And this cycle could repeat, clone by clone until he achieved his ideal.

He could do it—that much he knew. It was about whether he wanted to or not. Could he settle for anything less than perfect?

No one greets me when I arrive home from cross-country practice. The house seems bland and gloomy again for the first time in a couple of weeks.

I hesitate and then call Mimi's name. My words and empty silence echo back to me.

A small pit carves into my stomach. Nothing seems to be wrong really, Mimi could just be busy somewhere, but a sense of unease washes over me and it feels as if I've returned to the day of Lumie's death—nothing changed except for a conspicuous absence.

My steps at first are muffled and cautious when I decide to check on her. But gradually, my pace quickens and I don't care to ensure that I should be quiet. I call Mimi's name, bolt between rooms, and feel my breath shaking.

The nanny was sent away a couple days ago.

Mimi's not here. But she's not supposed to go outside. No one's here. Not my father, not Mimi, it's just me.

I dial my father's number as I do another lap through the house, fingers rapidly tapping the back of my phone.

"What is it?" His words are curt.

"Where's Mimi?"

"Who? Oh. Forgot you called her that."

"Where is she?"

"Why do you sound so horrified? It's as if I did something horrible to her."

"You did do something!"

"I thought you resented her. Didn't know you'd care so much."

"What about you? You don't care? She's your daughter!"

Silence on the other end. I make sure not to hang up and text Yuhai to borrow his car.

"I dropped her off at the park," the Doctor says when he speaks again, "she'll be found in a couple of hours. When they can't find any parents or identification, she'll be sent to an orphanage."

"You abandoned her?"

He talks over my outcry. "I'm confident I can create another one within a couple of months. A better one."

"What?"

"Good God, how can almost everyone in the Underground hang on to my every word," the Doctor spits venomously, "but you never listen? Weren't you the one that brought up the fact that the clone didn't have Lumie's energy? Lumie's personality? I'll make sure to fix that this time."

“No, that’s—”

“Do you have to be so troublesome? Is it about ethics? Isn’t it normal to replace things you’ve lost? Morally, I’m completely correct. I have no other intention other than bringing Lumie back. Didn’t she deserve to live a longer life?”

I see Yuhai pull up and I find myself sprinting and fastening the seat-belt, yelling into my phone even though my words won’t have any effect.

“What about Mimi’s life? Take some responsibility! You said that humans change all the time, but you’re really trying to control someone’s personality? Do you think Lumie would want this?”

How can a man be so wrong? I jerk my phone from my ear and slam my finger down on the end-call button. My throat throbs from hollering.

It feels like an eternity before we arrive. I turn on my phone’s flashlight and begin stumbling through the park.

I’m just about to be convinced that the Doctor was lying and that she’s not here at all when I come across her, balled-up on the same fake grass I laid on weeks earlier, eyes wide and lost.

In that moment, when I run to hug her, it’s as if she’s a tiny injured bird.

Her voice is wobbly when she talks.

“Who am I?”

Student Name: Edlyn Wang
Grade: 10
School: work independently
Title: Untitled
Category: Personal Essay & Memoir
Key: Silver Key
Educator:

In the year 3086, by some miracle, the human race has persisted through floods, famine, pestilence, and war. They have survived but not thrived, living like hermit crabs in the shells of old skyscrapers and apartments remanent from the last generations. In an unexpected catastrophic event, ancient failed rifts, aulacogens, and subduction zone faults all around the world have successively ruptured, producing the largest seismic event ever to befall the planet. Survival of humanity on the line, world leaders gather to discuss a resolution to the imminent danger.

July 5th, 3086

17:30

M.V. Opulence

Somewhere in the Pacific Ocean

Kings, queens, presidents, prime ministers, and ambassadors from each of the 135 countries of the world sit in concentric semicircles facing a central stage in the large auditorium of the former cruise liner. The room itself, true to its name, possesses a facade of opulence, which has worn away after centuries of disuse; gold paint chips off deco molded wallpaper, cracked leather stretches across cushy seats, and velvet carpeted floors bow in under years of strain. The atmosphere was thick with electricity, a nervous buzz of conversation filled the room like static. In the crowd, lips are downturned, backs ramrod straight, hands fidget in laps. A large balding man with round cheeks and flushed pink skin makes his way to center stage, heels clacking against linoleum resounding through the room like gunshots, silencing the background conversation. His assistant follows in his wake, head bowed meekly.

“First and foremost I’d like to thank everyone for joining us today in this impromptu meeting. I’m sure you all already know why we are here: the world seems to be breaking apart under our feet. Each episode of shaking is increasingly intense, and by the time climax is reached, the fabric of society will have already been torn apart. Unless we can come up with a solution, this may be the last year humans are alive.” the UN Secretary-

General grimly proclaims to his audience. "So let's get straight to the point, does anyone have a proposal for how we stop this?"

"We need somewhere unaffected by the earthquakes."

A tentative silence follows, until finally, a voice breaks through the heavy stormcloud that had settled over the room like a ray of light.

"In our records that survived the Great War, there is a scrap of paper that describes this type of ground shaking," Germany begins, "It says that there are 3 types of earthquake waves, the most destructive of which are surface waves, which travels along the surface of Earth. The other two, the s-waves and p-waves propagate through the body of our planet and are not as destructive. The paper mentioned that s-waves don't travel through the core at the interior of Earth, and p-waves slow." He stops there, hesitating.

"So what you mean to say, is that we should live inside Earth?" the General inquires.

"Yes, that would be the logical conclusion to come to," Germany responds uncertainly.

"That sounds like a grand idea, Germany. Begin excavating a passage to the center of Earth as soon as this meeting concludes. Everyone else, prepare your citizens for relocation. We will meet again in one month to discuss the logistics of our migration. This meeting is concluded." the General finishes.

The tension that had previously filled the room now dissipates, and a gentle lull of conversation returns. Satisfied with the unanticipatedly quick resolution, the politicians have once again fallen into a complacent existence, eager to ignore the reality of the situation. All they could do was wait until next month for salvation. As they lazily filed out of the auditorium, even an occasional flash of teeth could be seen here or there.

August 5th, 3086

14:05

M.V. Opulence

Somewhere in the Pacific Ocean

On the cruise, world leaders now gather in a tight-knit group. They speak of the tragedies that had befallen their nations in the past month without propriety.

"Last week an earthquake triggered landslides that smothered a whole province." Ethiopia asserted.

"Just yesterday a tsunami flooded our capital," Japan offers as a response, "an entire city was washed out to sea."

Only Germany sits alone, face pale.

“Welcome back everyone, let’s begin.” the voice of the General Commands. “Germany, is the passage ready?”

Germany stands to address the crowd, wringing his hands. “Yes, um, actually we ran into some unforeseen problems. All was fine until we reached around 4 miles deep. It kept getting hotter the further down we dug, and eventually, our drills just stopped working. The sidewalls also kept collapsing in on themselves, and we couldn’t get any further. We had to call the project off.”

It is only now that decorum returns to the proceedings, each country finally recognizing the severity of their situation.

“Why did we trust Germany with this? Their history is littered with mistakes.” someone whispers but is quickly shushed.

The General is quick to regain his composure. “Sit down Germany. Well does anyone else have any new proposals?”

This time it is China who speaks up quickly. “Well, maybe we cannot live on Earth. But every night, the Moon is so close.”

“The Moon? Do you have proof that would be more habitable than Earth?” North Africa rebukes.

“Yes, since last World War, our country has looked to Moon for guidance. The moon has never change. Also my people have story about women who live on Moon. Her name is Chang e. Maybe you hear before?”

“Yes, that could work. Well China, please enlighten us with your plan for getting us to the moon.” The general ignores China’s question.

“That’s very simple. We build a ladder. Then all healthy young men can climb.” China finishes with a laugh, perhaps at the absurdity that there may be any healthy young men left at all.

“Very well then. You will build the ladder. Everyone else, hold out for two weeks, we will reconvene then. This meeting is dismissed.”

The tension that had previously filled the room now dissipates, and a gentle lull of conversation returns. Satisfied with the unanticipatedly quick resolution, the politicians have once again fallen into a complacent existence, eager to ignore the reality of the situation. All they could do was wait two weeks for salvation. As they lazily filed out of the auditorium, even an occasional flash of teeth could be seen here or there.

August 19th, 3086

14:05

M.V. Opulence

Somewhere in the Pacific Ocean

World leaders sit tense in the grand auditorium of the M.V. Opulence. The great hall is noticeably feels inexplicably wider than before, as more than half the seats now remain folded against the backs, unoccupied.

"It's monsoon season, much of East Africa and South Asia was decimated by one last Tuesday." someone whispers to their neighbor in explanation.

Of those that remain, red webbed eyes and sunken cheeks are mirrored on every face. The previous month, these same individuals had been drunk upon hope, stomachs growing wide with sunshine liquor.

"China, are you ready to begin relocation?" The General demands without introduction.

"No, we build ladder 200m high. But when we lift up, it all falls apart." China responds in a desolate tone.

An outcry erupts from the audience, "Are we all going to die then?"

"Everyone remain calm." The General responds, although his bald head has noticeably broken out with a sheen of sweat. He levels a glare on China. "We must leave the problem solving to the more developed countries" he inveighs, although to suggest any country of the past 3 centuries could be considered developed was laughable. "Perhaps we must stop trying to avoid the problem and face it head-on. How do we stop these faults from rupturing?"

"We glue the faults back together!"

No one questions America.

Everyone files out of the room quickly after the meeting ends. They are eager to return to their countries, fearful the earth may have reclaimed their homes in the brief time they had been gone.

September 9th, 3086

14:05

M.V. Opulence

Somewhere in the Pacific Ocean

5 people have made it back. They sit as sacks of skin and bone, all resigned. It may as well have just been a formality to continue these meetings, for everyone knew all was lost. They had waited too long, now Earth was past saving.

"America..."

"We dumped tons of CA down the Farallon trench off California. Now the water burns through skin, and the sea has turned black, painted in belly-up minnows. We had a magnitude 6.7 Earthquake yesterday. Half of San Francisco slid into the sea."

"Does anyone have anymore?"

"No." resounds through the room.

For the first time, the General's assistant speaks up. "Sir, may I suggest something? "

The General regards him with surprise, "Yes, get one with it."

"This is not a solution, but perhaps a necessary action. We need to buy more time, and I think it's time we take some outside input," the assistant explains, "Bring everyone aboard this ship where we are safe. Then we can all collaborate. This is our only chance for survival."

The other six all exchange uncomfortable glances at his suggestion. They have no interest in sharing their space with others, and yet no one can come up with a reason to object.

"Alright." The pain in making this decision is evident on the General's face. "We will bring the survivors on board. Next month. We will take their input on survival. Everyone is dismissed."

No one rushed back home. The five remaining were far too eager to linger on the lavish ship. Images of death and destruction had burned themselves into the minds of every being the past few months. To those lucky enough to have it, the ship was a reprieve from reality, far enough from shore where tsunamis and giant swells would pass under the hull of the ship undetected, as insignificant as ripples on a lake. They were safe here, if nowhere else.

September 6th, 3086

14:05

M.V. Opulence

Somewhere in the Pacific Ocean

Student Name: Elizabeth Taboada

Grade: 11

School: Catholic Literary Arts

Title: Voicemail

Category: Poetry

Key: Silver Key

Educator: Norson Fernandez

Voicemail

Hey, it's me your daughter. I'm calling because well
I found a photo of us, I think from last fall;
I guess this struck the strings of my heart. And compelled

me, lying on the floor of some random hotel,
to realize my smile is not the same at all.

Hey, it's me your daughter. I'm calling because well

I miss your church, your music of ever-sweet bells,
That rang when we gazed at the stars of the nightfall
I guess this struck the strings of my heart. And compelled

me to really wonder how it was that I fell
into convincing myself, to reject your call.

Hey, it's me your daughter. I'm calling because well

I'm pacing now. Trying my hardest not to yell.
I'm on a walk with no end! In this solemn hall.

I guess this struck the strings of my heart. And compelled

me to collapse upon my knees. My Lord, I tell

you, today, I shatter my pride against this wall!

Hey! It's me your daughter! I'm calling because well

I guess this struck the strings of my heart and compelled.

Student Name: Sarah Spalding
Grade: 9
School: J Mark Price's Reading & Writing Workshop
Title: Worth It
Category: Short Story
Key: Silver Key
Educator:

Aster. Nate. Sky. Bryce. The names of my friends run through my head as I stand above the body of our enemy, Shayde. Tugging my sword free from his torso, I exhale, looking up to the stormy sky as the clouds release their first tears in over two years. I close my eyes, breathing the dewy-humid smell in deeply, allowing the rain to wash the blood from me, my own tears mixing with the rain and gore running down my face.

Aster. Though we didn't meet until we were twelve, we were closer than sisters ever could be.

Sky. One of my best friends, she was always the one to pull me back when my emotions ran too high.

Bryce. A chaotic little demon whose humor, no matter how dark, could always make everyone laugh.

Nate. Better than an older brother, he was the one to finally teach me swordplay.

Aster. Her hand reaching out as she fell from the cliff.

Sky. The gaping wound in her side, her scream of agony.

Bryce. Laughing until her last breath.

Nate. The horror on his face as his own sword skill let him down.

Was this win really worth all the losses? Were my best friends really worth this new freedom? Did Shayde's one death really amount to all those others?

Opening my eyes, I stare unseeingly at the dark, wilting plain around me. The only thoughts circling my head were those of my friends, each of their deaths playing out over and over, reminding me that they were gone. Reminding me I was alone.

Aster fell first, quite literally.

The day was dark, lightning flashing through the air, wind whipping and howling. The five of us stood scattered across a cliff plain, the sounds of metal on metal loud over the wind. Shayde's forces had ambushed us on our way back to the town for a report. He, himself, had gone after Aster first, her fiery red hair making her an easy target. Shayde's second, a burly-looking man with a scar from the corner of his left eye to his mouth, had singled me

out. His sword clashed with both of mine and my feet skidded back on the rough, loose gravel underneath me. My arms shook, energy draining quickly.

My opponent pushed his sword out, flinging me backwards, forcing me to stumble and fall back onto the hard ground. He swung his blade out and I rolled away before it could do any real damage. A familiar, concentrated grunt sounded on my right.

Head snapping towards the sound, I found Nick driving his sword through the female fighting him. He stood, breathing heavily, for a moment, before turning around and charging to help Bryce and Sky with the four challengers they were against. Bryce's face was twisted with a smirk as her daggers clashed with one of Shayde's men and she used the leverage against him to turn his sword to the side, swiping out at one of his own comrades. Behind them, Shayde and Aster were locked in their own intense duel, slowly getting closer to the drop off.

"FOCUS ON YOURSELF, PHOEBE!" Bryce yelled, her commanding voice carrying over the wind and sound of clashing swords. Her bright eyes darted to me, scolding and reassuring. She winked. "WE'VE GOT OURSELVES HANDLED!"

Right on cue, the tip of a sword sung in front of my face as it whipped through the air. I snapped my focus back to the man in front of me, grunting as I pushed my burning legs back up. Once again, my sword clashed with my opponent's and was knocked aside.

Suddenly, a shrill shriek tore my attention back to Aster. Shayde stood in front of her, sword dangling, relaxed, by his side, as he watched her arms pinwheel wildly, hair whipping around her face. Her feet were slipping on the cliff edge behind her, pebbles falling over the side.

Regaining her balance, she recklessly thrust her sword towards Shayde, attempting to jump forward, away from the dangerous edge. Shayde lazily brought his sword back up to block her, forcefully pushing it out to the side, then backwards. The move sent the weapon flying out of Aster's hand and over the cliff's edge.

Screaming through gritted teeth, I slipped past Shayde's second-in-command, sprinting towards her. Aster's wide, tear-filled eyes locked on me over Shayde's shoulder, her chest heaving. Knees bending, she braced herself. Like lightning, Shayde's foot kicked out, hitting Aster's chest and kicking her back. She screamed, again, as her feet slipped over the edge and she began to fall backward.

"ASTER!" Sky shouted, separating herself from Nick and Bryce to rush towards our friend; she was much closer than me, but still so far away. Shayde kicked out at Sky before she could reach Aster, sending her rolling in the dirt. Aster's outreached hand disappeared over the edge, falling into the darkness.

"NO!" I cried, feet skidding to a sudden stop, watching the edge, hoping to see a hand claw over the dirt at the top. No hand did and I was forced to turn back to Shayde's

second, who was once again rushing towards me with his sword. Having killed another man, Nick turned towards Sky and Shayde, starting towards them as Sky scrambled for her dagger.

My swords continue to clash with Shayde's second as I kept an eye on my friends, refusing to let another die. Nick's sword met with Shayde's as it swung down towards Sky, giving her time to pop back onto her feet, dagger in hand. On their right, Bryce was a whirl of fury as her sword caught the front of one of her opponents, causing the women to stumble back, allowing Bryce a small reprieve.

My opponent drove his sword forward, forcing me to pull my full attention back to my own battle. The tip scraped my cheek, dragging a hiss from between my clenched teeth. Blocking another of his attempts at my chest with the sword in my right hand, I swung the other up with a snarl, cutting a deep line in his left shoulder. His hand spasmed, sword dropping and eyes widening. I used his surprise to thrust my sword through his heart before yanking it free, not waiting for his body to hit the ground before rushing towards Sky and Nick. Another one of Shayde's men collapsed near Bryce, leaving her fighting the injured women.

Before I could join my two friends, Shayde pushed Nick to his knees, spinning quickly and sending his sword towards Sky's unprotected side. The metal sunk into her skin as Sky howled, Shayde tearing the sharp point downwards. Sky stumbled away, collapsing. Her chest rose unevenly, but it was still rising. The wind picked up, rushing and pushing against me as I tried to reach her in time.

"ROLL TO THE RIGHT!" I ordered, willing the gods to allow my legs to pump faster. Sky was too slow. I was too slow. Shayde thrust his sword into her chest before immediately pulling it out and turning back to Nick.

Nick roared, pushing off of his knee and rushing Shayde. Their swords clashed, a new energy filling Nick. His gaze dripped venom as he bared his teeth. Just as I reached them, another cry reached me. I jerked to the left, eyes ripped towards Bryce. She was laughing, a large gash down her front, her opponent on the ground by her feet. Nick's rough hands pushed me out of the way as Bryce fell to her knees, then onto her side. Her laughter faded quickly, eyes crinkled upwards, even as they closed.

"Focus, Phoebe," Nick gasped, his attacks becoming more aggressive.

"Yeah," I nodded, slowly, turning around before raising my own swords. Blocking one of Nick's strikes, Shayde whipped his sword around, flicking my own rapier out of my left hand before I was ready.

"Give it up," Shayde laughed. "You know you can't beat me. Surrender now and neither of you will have to die."

"Never," Nick growled. "Not after today."

Shayde's foot shot out, wrapping around my ankle and bringing me crashing onto my back as he continued to parry Nick's strikes. My vision went unfocused, as did my thoughts. I couldn't think past the friends I had failed.

"Come on, Phoebes," Nick panted, chancing a comforting look at me. "Don't zone out on me, now." I rolled back, attempting to push myself up onto my sore feet. I couldn't let Nick down too. I wouldn't. Shayde's booted foot connected with my back, pushing my stomach into the gravel, the coarse material stinging the cut on my cheek. "Come on, Phoebe," Nick grunted, the sounds of metal rhythmically clashing with metal ringing through the air.

Trying to push myself up again, my wrists buckled and I landed back on my stomach, coughing and spluttering. "I can't," I groaned, feeling tremors rack my exhausted muscles.

"You're already failing," Shayde taunted. "Most of your friends are dead and you're both close to it."

"Shut up!" Nick shouted, swinging wildly, recklessly at Shayde. Shayde dodged easily, sending Nick stumbling forward with the force from the swing. Shayde smirked, turning his attention to me just as I had made it onto my knees. He cockily swung his sword around before aiming it at my chest. Slowly pulling my heavy sword up, I braced my shoulders. Shayde swung, but Nick's sword was there, blocking his strike. Using this to his advantage, Shayde struck out to the side, toward Nick.

For the first time ever, Nick was too slow. Before he could swing his sword back around to parry, Shayde thrust his sword into Nick's stomach. Nick gasped, eyes widening as he dropped his weapon. Shayde tugged the sword free and my last remaining friend fell to his knees. Placing his hand against the wound, blood seeped around his fingers as he fell forward. His chest wasn't rising.

"No!" I croaked, my gaze slowly shifting to Shayde as he spun towards me, smiling. His sureness of victory sparkled in his electric-blue eyes.

I released a cry, rage and pain fueling my movements, boosting my adrenaline, my need for revenge. Finding the strength, I threw myself off the ground, leaping towards Shayde. He parried even my strongest attacks, but I had vengeance on my side. With a final cry, I dropped to my knees, swiping at Shayde's legs. In his surprise, he stumbled backwards, losing his sure footedness. I attacked, driving my sword through his heart, watching the light fade from his eyes with a cruel smile.

Shayde was dead. We-I was free. But- I had lost everything for this freedom, this safety that we had been fighting for since we were little. And, honestly, maybe it wasn't worth it.