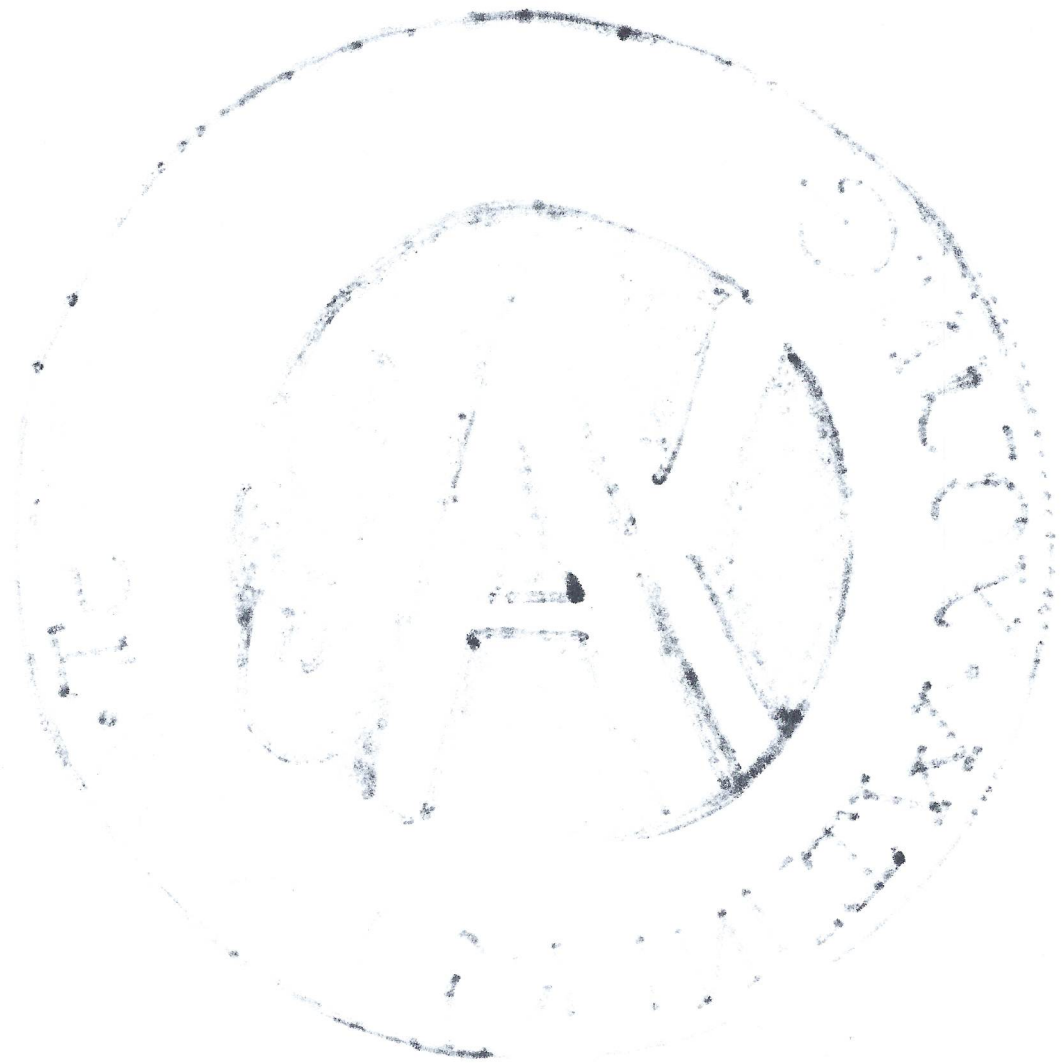


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*The Eastern Shore Literacy
Association
proudly presents:*

*Young Authors' Contest
Winners*

2018-2019

YAC Committee Co-Chairpersons:

Lizanne Wallace

And

Brian Cook

YAC Anthology Editor:

Robin J. Adamopoulos

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Grade 2 Poetry

“The Day Before Christmas” – 1st Place Winner

By Bre’Ara Thompson

It was the day before Christmas break
And I felt very sad.
I was going to miss my teacher very bad!

I felt worried and upset!
My teacher said I could call her and
So I cheered up next!

“Being a Big Sister” – 2nd Place Winner

By Kayleigh Webster

I am a big sister to two girls!
One of them is three and the other is on her way.
I love them very much.
I have to help my mom clean up their mess.
I could help to get them dressed.
It is an important job to be the big sister.

“Going to a Friend’s House” – 3rd Place Winner

By Trevor Langton

One day I went to Brayden’s house to play.
We jumped up and down on the trampoline that day!
Then we went on his slide.
Next we went on the monkey bars and tried!
We tried to build a fort in the woods together.
It was sunny weather.
We played Call of Duty Nerf guns!
That was so much fun.
We played with his sister Claire.
They also call her Claire Bear.

Grade 3 Poetry

“My Future” –1st Place Winner By Ellie Phillips

I don't know what I'm going to be.
What does the future hold for me?
Will I be an artist or a rapper,
A singer or a tapper?
I may be a marine biologist who studies the sea.
I might be a poet who writes beautifully.
Will I be a dancer who does choreography?
Or, will I travel the world and do photography?
Oh what choices there are!
But for now, let life be life,
and me be me.

“All Four Seasons”—2nd Place Winner By Josiah Sessoms

Winter is filled with lots and lots of snow.
But it's near Christmas with the mistletoe.

Summer has the bright, bright sun.
That's not all, it's lots and lots of fun.

Fall has lots of colorful leaves and butterflies.
But it's still windy in the forest outside.

Spring is windy and sunny at once.
Bunny rabbits bundled up, a bunch!

Going back to winter, where all you see is white.
And then you have the snowstorm, that you have to fight.

SUMMER! You have a waterslide and a pool.
On the other hand, some kids have to go to summer school.

Fall has a little rain, so don't slip!
Leaves are like wet banana peels, so don't fall on your hip.

Spring is sometimes rainy and cold.
At that time, the roses and daisies unfold.

Grade 3 Poetry

**“Forever Friends”—3rd Place Winner
By Cecilia Diehlmann**

You want a unicorn to be so big, so true,
A unicorn, who wants a child, that’s smart and strong like you.
He’ll bring you high above the crowd,
And you can dance on rainbows and jump from cloud to cloud.
You’ll be the best of friends. And when you say goodbye,
You will be sad to see him go. You, maybe, even cry.
He might be gone, but in your heart, you’ll stay forever friends.
Just think of him, his charming smile and know that friendship never ends!

Grade 4 Poetry

**“Frown”—1st Place Winner
By Peyton Davis**

Sitting in my boat with a frown,
Rowing around, hoping I won’t drown.
I can’t swim at all,
I really don’t want to fall.
As I sit alone,
I am wishing I was at home.
I really need someone to talk to,
I am feeling really blue.
Looking in the swampy moat,
I see a splash, I hear a croak.
Hippity hoppity here comes a frog,
He hops up onto a floating log,
He’s not down, he has no frown.
Hey a friend! Now my frown is upside-down!

Grade 4 Poetry

“I’m Face to Face with a Gorilla”—2nd Place Winner

By Henry Holt

I’m face to face with a gorilla, and I think it’s very terrifying.

Maybe if I didn’t bring a key to pick the lock to the cage, and maybe if I hadn’t woken
the gorilla

up he wouldn’t be so madifying.

Maybe I should just skedaddle, or maybe I should get a saddle,
to ride ride ride that crazy gorilla.

That gorilla that I’m face to face with.

But maybe, on the other hand, I should start RUNNING!

“A Mother’s Everlasting Love”—3rd Place Winner

By Gabriella Chloe Damouni

A mother’s love is like an everlasting flower.

A baby growing in a belly is like a new seed planted.

When the baby gets bigger, the seed begins to sprout.

Then the baby is born, and the sprout turns into a flower.

When the baby grows up through life, the flower blooms fully.

Then the child leaves their mother and moves on.

That is when the flower loses its seeds into the air.

The mother will always love her child, and the mother’s love is everlasting.

That is an everlasting flower.

Grade 5 Poetry

“The Glorious Game”—1st Place Winner By Brody Webster

Baseball is a glorious game,
Hitting balls to have fame
Let's hope I play another game
Hitting balls
that hit the walls
But when you hit a home run
Then the crowd loves the game
And you might find yourself in the Hall of Fame
Feeling good but with a shame
Because you only wish you could play another
Baseball game
Just so you can hear the crowd cheering your name.

“Rainy Days”—2nd Place Winner By Aidan Gray

Rainy days, Rainy days
They aren't any fun
You could get wet, sad or mad
Possibly none
But you could play Uno
Or be the champion at clue
Or you can imagine you're an astronaut
In your spaceship 300,000 more miles farther than the rest of us
You could count rain drops
1 plop, 2 plops, and 3 plops
Or eat some candy like skittles, lollipops, or ring pops too.
You could read a book
Or help your mom cook
Now you see it's not so bad
First think outside the box
Because it's not as hard as it seems
Instead of waiting for the sun to start to gleam
Because a watched pot never boils
Instead of feeling down like gargoyles.

Grade 5 Poetry

“Snowy Days” — 3rd Place Winner By Kamryn Noble

Flurries falling from a fluffy cloud,
I watch as the snow on the road is being plowed.
Get on my coat, and I run outside.
Snow like a blanket far and wide.

When I turn to look at the woods behind my house,
I couldn't hear a squeak from a mouse.
As I walk in under the trees,
There wasn't the slightest bit of breeze.

The snow is sparkling and shining against the evergreens,
Almost as if bowing as it leans.
Crystals of ice,
Oh, how nice.

Grade 6 Poetry

“Behind the Trees”—1st Place Winner By Diva Shrestha

Behind the trees I went,
behind to the dark forest,
my basket full of cake and wine.
My past-self full of joy,
not knowing of the wicked creatures who roam.

Soft sounds of crackling branches I had heard;
the trees making daytime seem so dark.
as cold as a ghost’s whisper through night.

Deep in this forest are creatures I didn’t know could come.
The scent of lonely cut-off at an instant.
I was not alone.

A monster, a wolf, ferocious & hairy; asking
for my ill grandmother’s present,
which I had brought in my little basket.

Now running to grandmother’s home,
jubilation coursing through my veins.
As I opened the entrance of the cozy hut,
many things occur behind the trees,
through the thick brush where the outside world
is not welcome, but this, I had not expected.

My grandmother was not my grandmother—
after interrogation, I knew it was just a disguise.
Grandmother & I escaped. Here I am now;
scarred but alive.

Alive to tell this twisted tale:
the sweet scent of cake dropping,
the wine glass shattering at my feet—
all behind the trees.

Grade 6 Poetry

“Where I’m From”—2nd Place Winner

By Megan Mitchell

I’m from the amazing steak for Christmas dinner,
The many games of soccer at Crown.
From the “I know you can do better,”
The warm risotto from the frying pan.

From the hours of dance recitals just so we would quit later,
The birth of baby cousins and marriage of others.
The many vacations to Busch Gardens, Universal, Disney, and New York,
The late-night pizzas and leftovers for the week.

I am from beating my dad at checkers and losing at cards,
From the White Elephant on Christmas Eve.
The love you to the moon and backs,
And my family supporting me all the way through.

I’m from private school with old friends and sleepovers with new ones,
The lacrosse in the spring and field hockey in the fall,
The playset at the old house and the blacktop here.
The pool that makes a great party and the herbs from the back garden.

I am from the smell of burnt candles when I walk in the house,
The creek out back I almost fell into.
From sledding down hills and wearing big jackets,
From scratches and dents on furniture and scars on us that hold memories.

The smell of popcorn at night and bacon in the morning,
From my siblings and I playing made up games we are too old for now.
The trampoline bounces we had to leave behind,
And wanted game nights that never happened.

I am from these memories they hold me tight at night and let me loose in the day,
I am made of these memories and get new ones every day.

Grade 6 Poetry

“No Need for Color”—3rd Place Winner

By Sydney Tingle

No need for color, just black and white,
No need for color in your dreams at night,
No need for frost and powder white snow,
Let's take that away, it will no longer show.

Everyone's the same, no need to cry.

Nobody's different to the mind's eye.

Sailing over the blue seas.

Take that away, please!

How about feelings, perhaps they're good?

Nope. Take them away, you would?

All of those things can cause harm,

Not like a bruise on your arm,

But damage deep within,

Causing your head to spin.

How about sugar, and taffy?

Have you ever heard of a cavity?

How about rain, sunlight, and the ocean?

Don't forget being soaking wet and forgetting suntan lotion.

No need for fireplaces, keeping you warm.

No need for rain, that could be a storm.

No need for love, that could be bad.

No need for birthdays, those won't be had.

No need for families, they could fight.

No need for staying up late at night.

No need for singling out one,

No need for hurt that comes from fun.

No need for a safe and for money.

No need for cavities from sweets and honey.

No need for remembering the past,

No need for worry for events that don't last.

No need for all things that cause pain,

No need for laughter during the rain.
No need for color, no need for blue.
In this community everyone will be the same as you.
In this community, we'll be the same.
The only difference will be our name.
Freedom will be an unknown thing.
No one will know about jewels and bling.
No need for color, just black and white.
No need for color in your dreams at night.
In this community everyone's the same.
All these people are obviously tame.
No one will know the terrible facts.
No one will deal with attacks.
Here we live in Utopia,
But is it really a true Utopia?

Grade 7 Poetry

“Copper and Gold”—1st Place Winner By Pim Noparat

Copper and gold: the color of my skin.
So many times, I’ve tried to change it.
I wanted to be myself and yet I wanted to be someone else.
Between those two things I was torn,
Because everything I was ever insecure about,
Lay in the way I was born.

The things I told myself,
You are not worth anything or anyone,
You will never be something or someone,
And each day they ate away,
Tomorrow and yesterday,
Until I heard them every day.

But now I find,
That in here,
In every line, it takes time.
I don’t know how,
But some way, somehow,
I can finally be myself now.

Copper and gold: the color of my skin.
The color of my pride,
The color of everything I ever did.
It runs true through my veins, bright and loud.
I look back on myself,
And I’m only proud.

Grade 7 Poetry

“The Swan”—2nd Place Winner By Mariah Robertson

Silently,
A swan glides
Above the glass water top.
its elegant
white
feathers
ruffel
in the
breeze
I watch,
full of
wonder
about this
beautiful
creature
such a fowl,
Water, taking
Birds follow
lovely, although
of their queen.
falter, she is so
white gowned
She does is right, because her neck always
stays high in the air. fair to all subjects,
They continue down the pond after the
white gowned queen, after the gorgeous
Swan gliding on the shimmering
Glass, chin up, head tall, forward, onward, down the lake, into the fog, after the queen

I am in awe, I have never seen
It bends its neck down to skim the
a single swallow. Suddenly, many colorful
behind her. The male mallards are quite
could never meet the brilliancy
She stands tall, she will never
confidant, the ducks follow their
queen, believing that whatever

Grade 7 Poetry

“Dream Awake”—3rd Place Winner By Samantha Lambertson

Why toss and turn
Why try to wake yourself up
When it might all be real
The terrible sight in your mind
Can't get it out
Can't wake up
No need to pinch yourself
That's a waste of time
Because if you can't wake up from this nightmare
Are you even asleep?

Grade 8 Poetry

“Wild Horses”—1st Place Winner By Ivorie Helmbright

Here you stand, pride of the herd.
Galloping through plains, your hooves a blur.
You and your herd follow the North star under the night sky.
Your coats displaying patterns, just like tie-dye.

Representing your ancestry, that traces back to the Equus-Ferus.
You run bold, with high set spirits.
Miles and miles of fenceless pastures.
Running reckless, with no rancher.

Roaming freely with the wind in your manes.
Stopping to graze on the grassy plains.
In a man-less land where you belong,
You stand untamed...your pride is strong.

Grade 8 Poetry

**“No Title”—2nd Place Winner
By Leigha Early**

She looks longingly into the distance.

Wondering if in reality she's happy.

She gets lots of likes on her Instagram pictures.

People tell her how pretty she is.

She is dating the cutest guy in the entire school.

She gets decent grades.

She is captain on all of the sports teams.

Is she really happy?

In reality she is not.

She is suffering from anxiety.

She doesn't feel beautiful in her own skin.

Her boyfriend doesn't treat her right at all.

She is struggling with school, and is worried about her future.

She doesn't have a passion for sports, her passion is music but her family does not want her to pursue that.

She is not happy at all.

No one even honestly knows how someone is feeling.

People put on brave faces and fake smiles to cover up how they are really feeling.

Know before you judge.

Grade 8 Poetry

“Gone Too Soon”—3rd Place Winner By Jack Greenwood

He arrived as a surprise, filling my world with joy
He was happy and playful, always chewing on his toys
But he chewed on things he shouldn't have, like tables, clothes, and chairs
But it was ok, because he was soft and fluffy, covered in gold-white hairs
Everyday I'd come home from school and he'd see me and wag his tail
Because I always gave him leftovers from my lunch box. Never did I fail
Even though half the time we came home to see him eating socks
I loved him, and I think he loved me
He would guard the house, and bark whenever there was a potential intruder that he could see
I would walk him across our neighborhood, because I knew it would make him happy
I know this poem might begin to seem kind of sappy
But it's true, he was my world, my light
But then it all changed, in the middle of the night
He was sick, and the doctors said his kidneys were about to fail
No more would he look up to me, and wag his big, golden tail
One sentence was all it took for him to be taken away
He could no longer be the thing that lit up my day
My sun was gone, and in its place was a moon
Ozzy died at four years old, he was gone way too soon

Grade 9 Poetry

“Intensity” —1st Place Winner
By Alexis Robertson

Heat five!

Shaking, I climb on the block

I can see the crowd cheering

But my **HeArTbEaT** makes them silent

TAKE YOUR MARK

My muscles clench

as I prepare to f l y

ERRRRRRR

I throw myself off the block

SPLASH!

I look side to side

Trying to keep up with my **competitors**

FLIP fast!

Race back to the wall

Slam!

Look at the board

FIRST!

Grade 9 Poetry

“Road Trip Happiness” —2nd Place Winner By Morgan Johnson

The car was full
With our bags and excitement
The doors slammed shut
And the radio turned on

We left the driveway
The trees passed by
We counted the cars on the road
Then drifted to sleep

When I watched
And the hills turned to mountains
Maryland, Delaware, New Jersey, New York, Massachusetts
Finally Vermont, and then Elmore

We arrived late at night
And slipped into the log cabin
I took a deep breath
And smiled

When the sun rose
We came outside
To see the beautiful lake
Surrounded by mountains

The adventures began
Pure happiness arose from our souls
As we summited the mountain
And saw the beautiful town of Elmore

Sun on our face
We splashed in the lake
Watching the loons and imitating them
Diving under the water

Riding bikes down the hill
And around the town
And swinging back and forth
From the tree in the yard

We followed the trails to the swim hole
Climbed on the rocks
And plummeted into the brisk water
Adrenaline rushing

To the home of Vermont's finest ice cream
And ate many flavors
And wandered through
The creek in the woods

Through the week
We adventured much
We smiled much
And learned what happiness really is

Happiness is
Exploring new places
With the ones that make you happy

Swimming
Hiking
Bike rides
Smiles

Grade 9 Poetry

“Breath No More” —3rd Place Winner By K. Cliff Collins

When My Breath, No More Will Be Breathed

Many a' person fears the life hereafter
When our day of living is no more
How do I deal with such a depressing fear?
How does anyone cope with knowing that someday,
In this world our breath will be breathed no more?

Well I personally believe in a religion,
A mansion in the sky,
Some believe, we come back as simply
As a tree sheds leaves and grows them again
But there are those who don't stop to think, that someday
No more in this world, my breath will be breathed no more

This is a way of living, good for some, but not to me
People say accepting death is giving up, not caring in a way
But me, I do care, because death, I know, is inevitable
I fear that day, pray it be far away,
When in this world, my breath will be breathed no more

Still I carry myself in a manner so bright and proud
And I dare a man to pull over my earthly remains a shroud
For when I pass and go away, I want people to rejoice and sing
For although I am with them no more,
My Savior, I will see, on that dark yet rejoicing day
When the Reverend will say
In the next world our dear departed sings,
But here, my mortal breath, will be breathed no more

Grade 10 Poetry

“At Least It Is Not Us” —1st Place Winner By Hannah Perdue

A flame so sacred
Turned amber destruction
And the people we all knew
Faded to snow
Drifting slowly to the cold, hard earth
The first blizzard of the coming bitter winter
Coating worn roads in hateful frost

Trudging down the streets
Bowed heads beneath looming gray clouds
Weeping for our losses
Ever so silently
Refusing to remove these dirty, old shackles
Our own frigidity freezing us in our tracks
As we feign indifference to the solemn howls of the prisoners and the wind

Tired souls
Claw viciously at chain links
Rattling the fences enveloping our hearts and minds
Pounding, screaming
Yet still we back away slowly
Evading all backlash
Though we allow the innocent to suffer
Because at least it is not us

Grade 10 Poetry

“To Be Gone” —2nd Place Winner By Briden Edney

Emptiness.
Gaping is the void of my being, consuming my life like a black hole
Could another person truly fill that aperture
Or is it mine to fix, to fill, to love Love.
To love my broken pieces. To love my dismay.
I have not yet learned how
To my impression, I never will learn
I need a strength that I do not obtain inside The darkness is slowly
consuming.
Consuming
Consuming Consumed Gone.

“Shema”—3rd Place Winner By Jonas Rush

Shema means hear and understand then obey.
This is what I will intend to do today.
It starts with a chat with God in the morning,
And then it is his words, my mind adorning.

Lastly, I must follow through with what he said.
This, I must if I ask for my daily bread.
To hear and comprehend is not quite enough.
It must come to fruition however tough.

Grade 11 Poetry

“All Hail”—1st Place Winner

By Hanna Lehner

I am Washington D.C. a capital of change,

I am the kids in the street chanting for their voices to be heard like the cicadas on a summer night all in synchronization,

I am white privilege, sailing to a new land that I will soon steal,

I am a feminist, looking at other women in fear as I clutch my car keys at night,

I am an ally to all minorities, refusing to raise my voice louder than my brothers and sisters to be heard;

I am a generation of change.

We are volunteering ourselves as tribute, we are becoming even more fearful as we hear the breaking news reverberate in our ears, our hearts, and our tattered country,

We are taxing to the older generations; perceived as less, as lazy, and as lethargic, never as an equivalent,

We are ethnically, sexually, and politically ambiguous; we create an “uncomfortable” conversation that society prefers to gloss over,

We are a force to be reckoned with; we are the generation that it is dangerous to be right when a government is corrupt.

Americans are respecting someone’s existence or expecting our resistance,

Americans are making history as we march, speak, or how we kneel when we hear the pledge,

Americans are an example no matter how good or how bad our actions are,

Americans are rebellious; tipping the tea no matter how costly,

Americans are at a breaking point and the world is looking for us for our next ruling,

Americans should listen to the children.

Grade 11 Poetry

“Breathe”—2nd Place Winner
By Sophia Peters

I used to try to control my life.

I would breathe in
what I forced myself to perceive as glass half-full situations
and breathe out ambition to go further.

But in reality,
I was drowning in broken self-made promises
and choking on aspirations.

I wasn't breathing at all.

Once I let things go,
I started inhaling the chaos,
and exhaling content.

And this time,
my lungs
are filled to the brim.

Grade 11 Poetry

“A Paper World”—3rd Place Winner By Madison Synowiec

Open the book

Begin the story

Enter a new world

My own stops turning

Hear the characters voices

See their faces

Journey with them to many places

Laughing, crying, and with them, dying

Nothing contained

Feel their love, joy, and pain

Turn the last page

Read the last word

And suddenly every sentence is blurred

It's so hard to leave this fantasy

Yet I'm forced to return to reality

Grade 12 Poetry

“Hidden Pages”—1st Place Winner

By Quinn Onley

The susurrus of inky blackness
symphonizing with the mad scribbling on paper.

The dim glow of a headlamp
lights the pages of emotion
spilling from the bed.

Sheet upon sheet flits
between the interstitial gap
of a soft bed
and a hard floor

A heart beats.
Solely, loudly drumming
with the feelings that
make it hard to breathe.

The heart was an open wound
and oozing with
blood running down
in bright streams

A final paragraph,
A suppressed sob,
And the pencil tip breaks.

Grade 12 Poetry

“Humans”—2nd Place Winner By Gracie Boyce

I see humans all around me
Swarming around like bees
Each one of them different
Each one of them unique

I see humans all around me
Making their way through life
Each one with their own story
Each one with their own thoughts

I see humans all around me
Walking, running, standing still
Each one of them a little strange
Each one a stranger to someone else

I see humans all around me
But one problem lies in these streets
I see humans all around me
But I don't see humanity.

Grade 12 Poetry

“Toothpicks”—3rd Place Winner By Victoria Payne

My elbows told me good morning as I climbed out of bed
My kneecaps waved and wobbled excitedly as I brushed my teeth
My hips jutted themselves outward in order to smile at me in the shower
I ignored them all while I ate what a fat man would eat for breakfast
As I walked out the front door however, I passed by the box of toothpicks
And they giggled like dry sand as they asked me why I was out of the box
The flagpole in the school parking lot was no kinder
He asked me to climb to the top so his shadow could touch the principal's car
All the way across the street, at the very edge of noon
The beanpole in the gym needed me to tie my feet to one end
So the gymnastics team could have more room for flips and dives
Toddy forget his pencil, and guess who he used to finish his math test
That he more than likely failed anyway
Toothpick girl, they call me
Maybe I should head back to the box

Grade 2 Short Story

The Land of the Pizza —1st Place Winner

By Brynlee Waters

There was a girl named Harper York who loved everything about pizza. She loved the crunchy crust, the gooey cheese and the warm sauce but her favorite thing about pizza was the toppings. Her favorite topping was pepperoni.

Harper wanted pizza for dinner every night but her parents wouldn't allow it. Instead, they said she needed lots of fruits and vegetables to keep her healthy.

"Eating pizza isn't healthy," Harper's mom said. "If you eat too much pizza, you will turn in to a pizza."

Harper thought turning in to a pizza sounded great!

One night, Harper was complaining about having to eat her vegetables for dinner.

"I don't want to eat this broccoli," said Harper.

"If you don't eat your vegetables, you will have to go to your room," said Harper's mom.

So Harper went to her room and fell asleep with a hungry belly.

The next morning, Harper woke up to the smell of pizza. She thought her mom was making pizza for breakfast but she was wrong. When Harper looked around, she knew she wasn't home. Everything she saw was shaped like pizza. The pillows on her bed were shaped like pepperonis, the wallpaper on her wall was different pizza toppings and the curtains were hanging like stringy cheese.

"Where am I?" Harper asked.

She looked out the window and saw pizza covered cars, pizza buildings and a swimming pool that was shaped like pizza too. People were even riding pizza bikes.

Harper ran outside and stopped to talk to a man walking his dog with a pizza leash.

"Excuse me sir, where am I?" Harper said.

The man said, "You are in the Land of the Pizza, of course."

"The Land of the Pizza?" Harper said in a very surprised voice. "What is the Land of the Pizza?"

"Everything is pizza in the Land of the Pizza," said the man. "It's for those who love pizza so much that everything becomes pizza."

"Does that mean I never have to eat vegetables again?" Harper asked.

"That's right," said the man. "In the Land of the Pizza there is only pizza."

Harper ran down the street and into the first store she saw. Everything inside was shaped like a pizza. The toys were shaped like pizza, the clothes were decorated like pizza and even the pets were decorated like pizzas.

She suddenly became very hungry. She found a restaurant but all they served was pizza. Harper was very glad. She ordered a large pepperoni pizza for breakfast. Her mom had never let her eat pizza for breakfast.

After breakfast she wanted to see what else there was to see in the Land of the Pizza. She walked to the park where the slides were shaped like pizza crust and the swings were made of mushroom tops. Even the merry-go-round was shaped like a big pizza with different toppings to ride.

Before she knew it, lunchtime came.

“More pizza for lunch,” Harper said.

This time she ordered a large cheese pizza, but her belly started to get sick of pizza. After seeing pizza, smelling pizza and eating pizza all day, Harper became tired of pizza. She realized that what her parents told her was true.

She walked to the man she had met before and asked him if there was any way she could go home.

“Sure, but to leave the Land of the Pizza, you have to eat your vegetables when you are told,” said the man.

Harper ran back to the room she woke up in. She laid in the bed, closed her eyes and when she woke up again she was finally at home. She went running out of her room and found her mom and dad.

“I’m sorry I never ate my vegetables when you told me to,” Harper said. “I promise to eat my vegetables when I am told. I don’t want to turn into a pizza.”

Harper’s mom gave her a hug and said “It’s okay Harper. How about we get some scrambled eggs for breakfast. You must be starving.”

“Eggs sound great and you can add a vegetable too,” Harper said with a smile.

The Treasure Hunt — 2nd Place Winner **By Elias Baldrige**

Hi! My name is Jacy and I’m eleven. I live with my mom and dad and my two brothers, Jack and Zugu. They are nine-year-old twins. Jack and Zugu can be annoying. They always wrestle, are loud, make me play with them and run around the house playing Nerf gun battles. They are best friends. They even share a room because they have a bunk bed. I’m lucky I’m the oldest and the only girl so I get my own room.

Today is one of the strangest days of my life. On Saturday I usually sleep in but of course Jack and Zugu were wrestling in the hallway making noise so that woke me up. I went to the kitchen to make myself breakfast. My parents were already there making Jack and Zugu’s breakfast. “Good morning Jacy,” Mom said. “Dad and I have a lot of work to do around the house today. Can you take the boys outside to play?” “Okay mom,” I said.

After we ate I called to Jack and Zugu, holding the back door open. “Come on!” They ran past me and outside to the yard. We began to play tag. I was It. I was chasing Jack and we were at the end of the yard near the woods. Suddenly Jack tripped over something and fell to the ground. “Are you okay?” Zugu and I asked him. “I’m fine,” Jack said rubbing his knee. “What did I trip over?” I looked down and next to him was a glass bottle with a ripped and crinkled piece of paper in it. Zugu picked the bottle up and tugged the cork from it. He pulled out the old paper. It was a treasure map! I flattened it with rocks so we could see what was on it better. “Why is a treasure map outside our house?” asked Zugu. “I don’t know!” Jack and I said. After studying the treasure map I realized it was the woods near our backyard. “Looks like we are going on a treasure hunt!” we all said excitedly.

After asking Mom and Dad for permission to go into the woods, we headed out. Before we went Zugu grabbed a shovel from the shed, just in case. I took the lead because I had the map in my hands. “I

hope we find the treasure!” we all said. Jack and Zugu are helping me by telling me which direction the treasure map says to go. We are getting along and working together. I guess my brothers can’t be that bad sometimes.

The treasure map takes us deep into the dark woods. I was getting a little bit scared. Zugu and Jack were too. We were going so far from our house I couldn’t even remember which way was home. It was getting dark and cold, and we heard scary noises. “What was that?” I said. “It was an owl,” Jack whispered. We had been walking for a long time and had not found anything. “We’re never going to find the treasure!” Jack and I said at the same time. We were all frustrated.

Just then Zugu shouted, “Hey guys, look what I found!” It was rock with a faded scratch of bones in the shape of an x. It was X marks the spot! It was the same spot on the map! We all were so excited! I used the shovel to dig into the dirt in front of the rock. While I was digging I looked up to tell my brothers something and I saw something on the tree next to me that gave me the creeps. On the tree trunk there was a skeleton body carved into it with the word BEWARE.

I tried to ignore my creepy feeling and continued to dig until I hit something hard. I bent down and started to clear dirt away with my hands. It was a treasure chest! Me, Zugu and Jack struggled with getting the chest out of the ground but finally we were able to pull it out. There was a key in the ground underneath the chest. I put the key inside the lock and I opened it. Guess what was inside? Jewels and money! “We did it!” we screamed excitedly. We ran back home and showed the map and chest to Mom and Dad and told them about our adventure. Mom and Dad were shocked. We also reported it to the police who took the chest so they could investigate. That made us sad.

But guess what? A couple of days later we got a letter in the mail from the police. It said since we did such a good job we could keep the treasure! Now we are the richest kids in the world! And I guess my brothers aren’t so bad after all!

My Day at the Beach — 3rd Place Winner **By Kenley Hallett**

One day this summer when I was at the beach with my mommy, I met a new friend. We found a spot near the ocean and I quickly unpacked all my sand toys to hurry and play. I ran down to the ocean and started digging a hole in the sand with my hands. While digging I saw something move and I quickly grabbed it. When I picked it up it looked like a little version of a crab. I laughed, and my mommy said it was a sand crab. The sand crab was so cute with a little blue strip in the middle and a little gray coloring. I named him Blue Stripe. I played with my new friend, having so much fun. Then mommy called me for lunch on the beach. So, I put Blue Stripe in the sand bucket while I ate my yummy lunch. After I was finished with my lunch, I ran back to my sand bucket and I played and played with Blue Stripe. I ran back down near the water and I started digging some more. I started yelling to mommy because I found another sand crab. I named this one Crabby. I put the 2 together and played with them for the rest of my beach day. I thought sand crabs pinched but they do not. Instead they tickle your hands. At the end of the day I had to say goodbye to my new sea friends. So, I put them back where I found them. Now when me and mommy go to the beach, I always run to the ocean with my bucket to dig up my new friends to play

Grade 3 Short Story

The Night I Spied on My Elf — 1st Place Winner

By Harper Hertrich

Many children think that elves simply fly back to Santa every night to report your behavior, but I know that is not true. That's not ALL they do. One night I spied on my elf, and now I know the whole truth.

First, my elf's name is George. George wears an attractive red suit every day when he returns from the North Pole back to my house. Sometimes when George comes back from the North Pole he is wearing a costume like a chef or a hula girl would. I think he is hilarious!

Next, George hides in unique places and only hides in them once, so it won't get boring. We have caught George in wine glasses, trees, bowls, and even playing with jumbo marshmallows! He actually made snowmen out of the marshmallows! I thought if he had enough time to play with our food, he may have too much free time on his hands. What was our Elf George really doing when my family was sound asleep? I thought that maybe, just maybe, George was up to something, so I decided to investigate this case. I geared up in dark clothes, hat and ski mask and sat in the dark so George would not see me. You won't believe what I saw.

I would like to inform you that elves party all night long! George parties with the neighborhood elves. The elves play Headbandz, Monopoly, Tick Tack Toe, and Pie Face! George loves Pie Face because Whip Cream gets everywhere so it is white all over! After they are done all of this, they spy on their sleeping owners! They laugh hysterically at the ones who snore!

So that is my story. If you don't believe me, then get a nap now and get ready to spy on your elf and see all the crazy things they do in person!

The End

A Hermit Crab in Ocean City — 2nd Place Winner

By Ryan Shipp

Once upon a time, in the town of Ocean City, Maryland, a small hermit crab lived peacefully on the golden sand. One day, a family strolled by collecting shells on the beach. The crab heard their footsteps and popped tightly into his shell for safety. The family saw his beautiful shell and put him in their bucket without realizing there was a crab living inside. The poor hermit crab was shaking with fright and felt homesick for his beautiful beach. He finally fell asleep and dreamed of the crashing waves and his beautiful view of the blue ocean. Suddenly, he awoke to a thud. He felt the vibrations of large hand picking him up and rolling him around with the other empty shells in the bucket. He was transferred with the other shells into a Fisher's popcorn bin.

"What is this sweet smell?" he wondered.

There was still some popcorn in the container. The crab nibbled on a small kernel and it was delicious and unlike anything he had ever tasted before in his little fishy life.

"Mmmmm." Though the crab. "This tastes delectable."

“Eeek” he heard someone scream. It was a girl. She said, “there’s something moving in this popcorn!!”

“I’ll fish it out” said the girl’s brother bravely.

“It’s a little hermit crab.” said the girl. Her eyes gleamed with the sight of him.

“We need to release this little guy,” said their mother.

“First, we need to show him some fun,” commanded the girl.

“Alright” said the mother. “Let’s take him to Thrashers and get this crabby some food”

“Maybe we should show him around a little bit?” said the girl.

“We need to give this crab a name,” said the brother.

“Hermie!” replied the girl.

They took Hermie to Thrashers and he quickly gobbled down some morsels of French fry.

“Now let’s take him to the arcade” said the girl.

“Don’t you think that’s a little too much for him? We need to release this little guy” said the mom.

“Please!” said the children.

“Dad will be here any minute with the car so pack up your things and let’s go. Actually, he looks hungry so let’s get Hermie another snack.” Said the mom.

“Crab cakes!!” said the brother.

“NOT funny,” said his sister.

They gave Hermie his very first taste of ice cream at Kohr brothers, then took him to Candy Kitchen for saltwater taffy. Finally, their time had come to an end and they returned him to the pristine sand at the beach. The hermit crab had had an adventure of a lifetime. At first, he had felt scared, but he ended up having fun, meeting new friends and tasting foods he’d never imagined existed. He had quite a story to share with his friends on the beach!

Friends — 3rd Place Winner **By Macaulley Jimmerson**

The Air Force was one of the last armed forces to be made because when the fighters and bombers were made the Army and the Navy owned them. The year was 1941. My name is Cam Drawde, but my friends call me “Stunt” because I’m always doing crazy things. I was a new lieutenant in the Navy and just moved to Hawaii. I had a friend who was in the Army and also lived on Hawaii. He was a pilot. The Army and Navy had planes in many different places right before World War II. Some were attacked like at Hawaii and there was another place right beside it which was Pearl Harbor, where I worked. When Hawaii and Pearl Harbor was attacked, we lost a lot of ships and planes. I jumped into the water to rescue people who couldn’t swim. One of the ships got out of Pearl Harbor but later got stuck in the Battle of Midway and sunk. The Arizona was sunken right in Pearl Harbor and that is where the Pearl Harbor Memorial is today. My friend and I were lucky to survive the attack. I go visit it every December to remember my friends. The other ships don’t show but the Arizona does show. The Army was not affected as much as Pearl Harbor because the Army lost a few aircraft but the

Navy lost a lot of battleships like the Arizona and others. We had to get right into action and start to attack back. My friend flew a special mission to attack Japan from an aircraft carrier and I was on the ship with him. We really wanted to win. So the Army and Navy had to quickly make more ships and planes and start to attack but it took a while because it was with billions of money and took a lot of work and they had to get all of it back. It was also difficult because some Navy people wanted more ships and some Navy people wanted more planes and they could not agree. After a while, we built more ships and planes and we won the war four years after we were attacked. The Air Force was formed in 1947 to be in charge of how military planes should be used. My friend and I both got to be in the new Air Force together.

Grade 4 Short Story

The Christmas Escape— 1st Place Winner

By Carley Malone

One Christmas Eve a nine-year-old girl named Anna Augustine Tolton was laying in the hay in an old damp barn. Her hands ached, and her back stung from the last wiping she got for not moving fast enough in the cotton field and talking back to Master Cartwell. She knew she couldn't live this life another day!

I should know...I am Anna Augustine Tolton. I lived on Cartwell plantation in Tennessee. I was a cotton-picking slave. I lived with my Mama, my brother Zakayah, and my Papa. Our owner was very cruel. He spent a lot of money and our family lived with the fear that we would be split up and sold to pay his debt if he ran out of cash. I tried for many weeks to talk my mama into planning an escape, but she feared my brother Zakayah couldn't keep up during the long journey. She would never admit it, but I think she was too used to the pain, and routine of breaking her back in the fields picking cotton. She was getting older and losing the hope of ever becoming free. It will be Christmas soon, I thought in my head. I won't be here another Christmas making my bones ache and working until midnight on the farm. This Christmas I'm going to find a way to escape. I told my family. They all thought I was out of my mind. "Maybe it's from all the work yesterday," said Papa. "You need to get it in your head slavery isn't ending, and you're just a kid!" Then Mama and Papa laughed calling me a silly girl. I was about to say something, but it wouldn't come out of me. It was rare to see them laughing together. "I am going to prove them wrong" I said quietly. This would be a Christmas of freedom. I told Mama I was going to escape. I know she thought I was pretending, but I knew in my heart I would prove to them I had the courage to find my freedom. I had heard the white church people talk about a slave escape route around Chattanooga that went through Bradley and McMinn counties.

They said there were caves along the route that the slaves hid in. It would be scary, and I knew it would be dangerous, but there was talk that the Quaker people would help the slaves by sending guides to help you along the route to Ohio, which was a free state. I packed the necessary things bread, apples and a few pieces of Mama's chicken, and snuck out in the dark after everyone went to bed. I fed the dogs the chicken, so they wouldn't bark and alert the Master I was gone. There I was, out searching for freedom while white girls, and boys were fast asleep dreaming about Santa Claus, Sugar Plum Fairies, and Christmas gifts. I traveled through the woods for several days and began to grow cold and hungry.

At night I slept on the ground. I was small and there was a lot of woods around me. I had no idea if I was going the right way. That Christmas I followed the brightest star in the sky, and quietly moved through the woods in the dark. I knew next Christmas I would have my freedom I kept on walking and hiding, and I finally I made it to the Ohio river. I found a Quaker Church with guides that helped me complete my journey. I had made it to the route in Kentucky where people hide you in their homes and pass you on from one house to the next. Sometimes it was a church, or the back of a store where I was taken. I met many strange people that were always surprised to see a child making the treacherous freedom journey across the state of Kentucky.

They were kind and gave me food. When I finally made it into Ohio, a free black family let me stay with them. The Ross family. I told them about my parents back in Tennessee. They told me that they knew of someone in the south who could help lead my family through Kentucky into Ohio. They said a friend from the south called Harriet Tubman, would help. A year had passed, and I was finally experiencing my first Christmas being free. I prayed my family would be brave and strong enough to survive their journey. That Christmas eve as I laid in my bed I heard a loud sound outside the house. When I went to the window and looked out, I had the best present ever. Harriet Tubman was standing there with my family. She said Merry Christmas Child and disappeared into the night.

The New World — 2nd Place Winner
By Peter Jin

I sat up in my bed. I was thinking about the flight I would take to Mars the next day. Getting out my bed, I put on my slippers and went downstairs for a drink. There was very little water left. That was when I remembered that I was going to Mars because Earth was short on food and water. Then, I went back to my room and fell fast asleep.

The next morning, I ate a tiny piece of cornbread and went outside with my backpack full of things. A taxi drove me to the flightport and I boarded flight 14, the 14th flight going to Mars. It looked cozy in the rocket. There was bathrooms, beds, chairs, a gym, pool, and a cafe to eat in. Then a voice interrupted my thoughts. "All passengers must take a seat in take off and landing" it said. I took a seat in a cozy looking chair and the rocket took off. When we reached space, the Earth looked small out of the window. Next, I grabbed a piece of bread from the cafe and sat down on my chair. After I finished eating, I went to the pool and took a swim in there. When I finished, I heard another voice. It said, "Passengers can go the the bunk room to choose a bunk now." When I went to the bunk room, about 40 robots were going with the passengers to choose a bunk. I went to a robot and I showed him the bunk I wanted. The robot marked the bunk of on a piece of paper that indicated that it was occupied, then said "It is time for dinner at the cafe" and left. The cafe was overcrowded when I got there. I took a sandwich and tomato soup and seated myself at a table. After I ate, I went to my bunk and fell asleep.

The next morning, I was not feeling hungry so I skipped breakfast. When I looked out of the window, I saw Mars. We were very close to it. Then, the pilot announced through the intercom, "All passengers must take a seat since we are about to land." I took a seat in a cozy chair in the bunk room. A

few seconds after I sat down, the pilot said “We are landing in a few seconds.” I felt a jolt and the rocket touched down.

When I stepped of the rocket, there was nothing around. When I went to the pilot to ask why there was nothing around, he said that if you search, you will find out and the other passengers chose to go back to Earth. Then I said “I will stay on Mars.” A hour later, the rocket took off. Then I went on a search for food. To my suprise, I found a cave. When I went to the entrance of it, I saw a door. Carefully, I opened it. On the other side of the door, there was a room full of people. “So that’s where the people were, so the pilot was right.” I went to the food stash and ate the best meal I had ever eaten, a lobster, a slice of cake, some vegetables, a bowl of noodles, and a bottle of fresh water. I learned to never give up. Finally, I fell into a deep sleep.

The Ikran Flight— 3rd Place Winner
By Miles Cox

Swoop... What? Whoa... Aaaahhh ! The sweet aroma of forest and flowers fills the air and Na’vi drummers make booming sounds with their drums But I am not relaxed! We fly low to the ground and the hammer- heads buck up and nearly hit us! I know what you’re thinking; WHAT DOES HE MEAN!?! I’m talking about the time I rode flight of passage at Walt Disney World Florida’s Animal Kingdom. In the days preceding our trip I was very excited to ride this ride. When I actually rode it, the ride was terrifying ...but cool!

In the beginning we got on the link chair and got “linked” to our Na’vi (alien guide). At first I thought it was really cool...but then I saw my mountain Ikran (means “Banshee” in Na’vi). He was blue and purple and looked like a dragon. The guide yelled, “Sivako!” (means “Rise to the challenge” in Na’vi). We plunged about 200 feet down and I almost hit a log! Now my heart was a drum and I was not relaxed! We came out of the forest and started gliding over a waterfall and lagoon...3,000 feet below us when we went over a herd of hammerheads (I have no clue) and they bucked up and nearly hit us!

As if that wasn’t frightening enough, Toruk, the alpha banshee, tried to eat us. Finally, we saw the beauty of Pandora at sunset and all of the alien animals that live there. When the ride ended the lights came back on and I could barely see straight. It was scary, but really cool. My stomach was disheveled but it was worth it for the adventure!

Grade 5 Short Story

How Mother Toucan Came to Be — 1st Place Winner

By Emily Whitelock

Once upon a time, three million years ago, on the continent of South America, Mother Toucan came to be. It was a clear night, the stars were shining and the moon was full and bright. The forest was so quiet that you could hear a foxtail agave branch swaying in the wind.

“Baby Toucan why aren’t you asleep?” asked Mother Toucan. Baby Toucan then pretended to be asleep by making snoring sounds.

“What Mama?” Baby Toucan yawned. His mother was starting to find him very unconvincing.

“Mama, the Big White Fruit in the sky is way too bright. I can’t sleep.” Baby Toucan was pointing at the moon. It was a full moon that night. Baby Toucan was right the moon was very bright.

The next night in Rio, Brazil the moon was even brighter. Mother Toucan was determined to let her baby sleep. She thought she could use a palm leaf.

Mother Toucan first tried to put up palm leaves around the nest in order to keep the moon light from shining into her nest. The moon shone through the small cracks in the leaves.

Papa Toucan woke up because he heard Mother Toucan putting up leaves. He wanted to help, but Mother Toucan was very independent and set in her ways. She wanted to do it herself, so of course that is what she did.

“No, Rafael, I need to do this myself” she exclaimed. “I am going try some Foxtail Agave leaves, they are much thicker than palm leaves” she said confidently.

That night Mother Toucan flew into the beautiful night sky and took the Foxtail Agave leave. Mesmerized by the bright moon in the sky, she flew up so high that she flew into the stars and never returned.

Every April, on a clear night you can still see Mother Toucan. She has the Foxtail Agave leaf and one night in that month there is no moon because of her. She finally got her baby to sleep.

The Shadow Figure— 2nd Place Winner

By Caitlin Shimko

It was a dark, cold, and stormy night in Madison, Wisconsin, and there was nothing to be heard but the wind in the trees, the rain pounding on the roof, and the sloshing of water in the puddles. Alexa Harris was cleaning up the hasty dinner of leftover mac and cheese, that by then was crusty and cold. The power had been out for hours due to the howling wind. The usually warm and cheerful house was as cold as ice.

Alexa was babysitting Mr. and Mrs. Nelson’s three kids: Bella, Tyler, and Robert. The three siblings were now sound asleep upstairs in their bedrooms. Alexa had just finished piling the dishes into the large farmhouse sink in the Nelsons’ spacious kitchen, when she heard a loud crack out front.

She hurried to the front window in the gathering room, and peeked through the lacy white curtains, only finding a downed tree across the street. Alexa’s keen eyes had spotted a dark figure in the

distance that was creeping towards the house slowly, but steadily. It was so subtle that Alexa had almost missed it, but luckily she hadn't. She drew the curtains shut tightly and checked the front door to make sure it was locked.

Suddenly the doorknob began to rattle and shake violently for what seemed like hours, which in actuality was only seconds. The shaking had stopped just as suddenly as it had begun, leaving questions inside Alexa's head. Why would someone go through all this trouble in the hurricane-like conditions to get to a house? Why this house?

A rapping began on the kitchen window, and Alexa rushed into the kitchen just as it stopped. She locked the back door as well, trying to comfort herself with songs from when she was little. Alexa sung softly with her voice trembling in her throat, hopelessly trying to drown out the rattling on the back doorknob. Her whispered song had begun to turn to sobs as lightning flashed before her eyes, and thumps filled the air. Alexa tried to track the thumps but found herself right back where she started.

After her heaving chest calmed down, Alexa tiptoed up the stairs to go check on the exhausted children when the realization hit her. The basement! There were concrete stairs leading down from the backyard into the basement, and the basement led to the main house. She sprinted down the stairs as fast as her skinny legs could take her, maneuvering through the expansive house, locking the basement door just in the nick of time.

The doorknob began to rattle, leaving Alexa lost in her troubled thoughts. She was so terrified that she curled up with her hands around her knees and shook even harder with fright. There was a loud crash out front which made Alexa realize that she had forgotten about the three children. Alexa hoped they weren't in danger!

Alexa stumbled to her feet and bolted up the stairs, clumsily bumping into things as she went. Just dashing up the stairs to the second floor felt like she was traveling the world.

All three children were safe and sleeping, so this reassured Alexa and gave her a surge of bravery. That surge pushed Alexa forward and down the stairs to the entry hall.

She quickly and steadily made her way to the front door without making a racket. The surge of confidence and bravery made it easier to pop open the front door only to see the rain being thrust toward the house by the wind.

Alexa wanted to convince herself that she was imagining things, so she decided to check the other two doors. Starting to feel a little foolish, Alexa headed down to the shabby basement and found it quite ordinary. It didn't seem like anything was out of place. In fact, the basement door was still secure.

Laughing to herself, Alexa calmly walked up the stairs to the first floor.

She pushed the back door open feeling even more foolish after finding the basement in a normal state. Taking one last look at the backyard, Alexa saw the Nelsons' massive flag flapping in the wind. Suddenly, the door blew shut from a powerful gust of wind, stopping Alexa from noticing the shadow figure silently slipping behind the large oak tree in the dark and pouring rain.

Alexa went back upstairs to check on the kids, not noticing that she forgot to lock the back door.

Grade 5 Short Story

The Basketball Journey — 3rd Place Winner

By Jaren Hudson

There was this boy his name was Ricky. He was in college and he was trying to go the NBA by getting drafted, but he still had tons of games left to play. But everybody was saying that he wasn't that good, he was trash, but he wanted to prove them wrong. So one day he said "I'm going to show them I'm going to prove everybody wrong."

Ricky trained and trained, he got up 6:00 in the morning every morning he was going to the gym to put up shots (lay-ups). When Ricky got done putting up shots, he was thinking about the game he had to play that night. It was their first game of the season and he was nervous. He went back to his dorm room to think about the game even more and get himself mentally prepared.

It was time. He excitedly walked to the gym with his head held high. He went to the arena to get ready for the game in the locker room, when his teammates got in the locker room Ricky said to them, "Guys when we go out here tonight we have to give it our all!" A rush of excitement filled the locker room. They were ready.

The team began to warm-up but all of a sudden Ricky got a call from the coach. His mom just called, his dad just got put in jail. Ricky was devastated, "what? Why?" he thought to himself. "He'll be back one day"

He left the locker room but the game had started already. Ricky's team was winning, the score was 34-21 so then Ricky had finally got in he scored a layup so the game fast forward in Ricky ended the game with 30 points after the game. Tons of people wanted to take pictures with him but he had to go back to the locker room. When he got back there he got interviewed by Sports Center he said "I just was playing hard and giving my teammates the ball and led to a win".

After the game he went back to his dorm in Ricky's roommate even wanted to take a picture with him his roommate said, "Dude you went off tonight I want to take a picture with you and post it on social media so I can get lots of likes" he joked. Ricky was so proud of his self but he still had to worry about the next game. They were playing against the Duke blue devils the best team in the nation.

While he was thinking he ended up leaving his dorm in going to the gym to work out and put up some shots, this time his roommate wanted to go with him and post pictures and videos of him playing basketball on social media too. Ricky joked that he was going to make his roommate, Robert, his agent. The next day, the two boys went to go visit his father while he was in jail.

"Son, I am so sorry. I've been missing you thank you for coming to visit me in here. Ricky asked his dad why was he in jail Ricky's dad said

"It's a long story, I was in a car chase with a police officer" he mumbled.

"Dad you know better than that." Ricky didn't know what to think, he put his head down and walked out the door, disappointed again.

After the visit, Ricky and agent Robert left to go back to their dorm. Both of them went right to sleep, thoughts whizzing in Ricky's head.

The next day Ricky woke up 6:00 in the morning again to go to the gym but before he left he got another call saying that his dad just got released from jail he was so happy that his dad just got out of jail he didn't know what was going to happen to Ricky's dad. After that Ricky had received another call from the head coach of the Cleveland cavaliers of the NBA the coach told him to come their next practice in his jet will be there soon to pick Ricky up, he was mind blown that an NBA coach called Ricky told agent Robert. He fainted when he heard the news Ricky said, "I told you I was going to prove everybody wrong."

Grade 6 Short Story

Blessing or Curse? — 1st Place Winner

By Ava Baer

I was running down the street, heart pounding like a drum, feet racing like a cheetah, as a few police officers ran straight behind me. You probably think it's because I did something illegal, like, robbing a bank. If that is what you're thinking, then you're wrong. Actually, someone else did, and that's what me and the cops were racing towards. There was a robbery at a nearby jewelry store and we were trying to get there as fast as we could. Soon after the officers and I entered the store, a tractor-trailer abruptly stopped at the entrance.

"What's that doing here?" one cop asked, out of breath.

"I don't know." I answered. Before anyone could figure out what was happening, about 10 hit men crawled out of the truck as if they were a colony of ants. I was starting to think that this was more than a jewelry robbery. They were the cavalry. The original crook looked at me, and even with a ski mask on, I could see that he had a mischievous grin on his face. I looked straight into his eyes as he signaled something to his new friends. Suddenly they started moving, and I got an uneasy feeling, like something awful was about to happen. I quickly made a decision, one that could seriously damage the thing that made me unique. I was going to use my powers to decelerate time.

As I squeezed my eyes shut as hard as possible, I could feel everything around me slow down. The air felt as if I were in a beautiful, quiet meadow, all alone, not a care in the world. Everything felt quiet and peaceful, until I opened my eyes. Everyone in sight were like statues, barley moving. The police officers pointed their guns at the hit men that came out of the truck. The hit men looked like they didn't even care. The witnesses in the background looked so scared, like they were about to die. After I was finished marveling at what I had done, I hand-cuffed the masked criminals and put them in the cop cars that had pulled up right after the tractor-trailer did. I fixed everything as it was before all of this happened. When I was done, I walked out of the jewelry store and just looked at it.

You're probably wondering what on earth just happened, who I am, and those would be very good questions. First of all, my name is Noel Hale and I am 15 years old. I'm a superhero, and my superhero name is Chill. And as for my powers, I can't really explain everything. I was born with cold powers. I don't really know what to call it, but I can freeze things, create ice, cool down a room, and make snow. And I can slow down time. I think it's because temperature is based on how fast the atoms in something

move. So, cold can make things—and time—slow down. And for some reason, it really hurts to do it and it might permanently damage my powers.

I got my powers because my great grandmother was cursed by an old witch for not paying a debt, and the curse runs in the family, but only for the girls. It usually gives a person something that they can't control, or majorly impacts their life. My mother's curse was that she was like Medusa, but whenever she looked at someone straight in the eye they would enrage. That's how she died. She accidentally looked at someone and they got so angry that they killed her. But now that I've learned to control my power, I can use my powers to help people. I've turned my curse into a blessing.

Anyway, I reversed what I had done to time as I ran back to my base, trying not to break down because of how much I just hurt myself. I entered, only to see Alex, my sidekick and older brother, crossing his arms and looking at me with an angry face.

"What?" I said, coughing.

"You knew that could kill you. So, why'd you do it?" He was always worrying about me.

"I had to save everybody. And I had a bad feeling about those guys. By the way, how do you do that? Hack into security cameras so easily?" I asked, as I was behind a wall taking off my superhero suit. I know, it's kind of cheesy, but Alex insisted.

"I'm smart. Why did you have a bad feeling?"

"I don't know. One of the guys gave me a weird smile. And they didn't even seem like they wanted to steal anything."

"Well, do we know these guys? Maybe they wanted to get revenge or something."

I came out from behind the wall with my normal clothes on. "Go through the mug shots people that we've already caught, and I'll tell you if one of them was the main guy. I looked him straight in the eye." Alex listened to me, even though I could tell he was still really mad about me slowing down time. But I thought he knew that I would just change the subject again.

While he scrolled through all the mug shots of the perps we put away, I either confirmed or denied whether it was the main masked robber.

"Stop!" I aggressively said. "That's definitely him."

"Okay, what? Do you want to go over to his house and arrest him with no proof?"

"No, I wanna go over to his house and ask him some questions."

The guy's name was Kyle Harvey. He stole a ton of money from one bank, robbed three museums, and robbed six houses. Apparently, he got out of prison for good behavior, which was surprising. This guy was a real criminal. He was like Thanos in *Avengers: Infinity War*, only this guy was a lot less powerful. But for my standards, he was powerful. Not because he actually had powers, but he had skill.

When we got to Harvey's house, he was not happy to see us. Alex knew that it was a really stupid idea to go to his house, unprotected. I couldn't use my powers because then, my identity would be revealed.

Harvey wouldn't let us in the door. "What do you kids want?" he asked violently.

I quickly answered, "Why do you want revenge on Chill?"

Harvey thought for a minute. "How do you know her?"

I hesitated. I couldn't tell him that I was Chill, and if I told him I was a friend of hers, he would be suspicious. I really got myself into a pickle, here.

I didn't realize it then, but Harvey knew that I was Chill. "Are you her?" he asked quietly.

"No." Alex said. "We work with her."

Kyle Harvey looked at me, indecisive. "I don't want revenge on her." He paused. "I want her powers!" Right after he said that, he pulled out a gun and was about to shoot Alex. Before I could even think I slowed time again. I was in the quiet, relaxing state of mind again. I mean, that's what it sounded like. I was scared out of my mind. I opened my eyes and quickly grabbed the bullet before it could hit Alex. I tried to keep time slowed down, but I had run out of power to use. Everything went back to the normal speed as I stumbled and fell on the ground.

"Why'd you do that?! There's usually more of a wait before you use your powers again like this! We don't know what will happen, now!"

Before I could answer, Harvey came over and touched my shoulder. Immediately, there was a gust of wind. It was like a tornado was forming around me, Alex, and Harvey.

"What's happening?" I asked, weakly.

"I have powers, too. Ones that can take away yours." Harvey smiled as he said this. "I never had any reason to steal them from you before, but now you're a problem, a pest."

"No," a female voice from above echoed. "Kyle Harvey, all you have ever done is evil. Noel has done nothing but good. Why should she die, and you live?"

"What?" Harvey said, in awe.

"I have no choice but to relieve you of your gift and give the energy of it to Noel." The voice said. Within seconds I felt stronger and Kyle had suddenly disappeared.

"Thanks, but, who are you?" I asked, and I could tell Alex was going to ask the same thing.

"How easily they forget. I am your mother. We deceased can do extraordinary things. I love you, children. Keep being the heroes that you are, have been, and always will be."

"Wait—" by then the wind was gone, along with Kyle Harvey, who I guess my mother sent back to prison.

Alex and I stood up and smiled at each other. This just shows that you have to choose the way you want things to be. Do you want it to be a blessing or a curse?

A Dancer's Journey — 2nd Place Winner
By Megan Mitchell

I can almost smell the beach air. Salty. Calm. Perfect. Toby and I throwing pebbles into the ocean during early morning... this is amazing.

Anna, wake up it is 7:05!" my mom yells in a strict voice.

Uugh, back to reality, the chaotic reality. I drag myself out of bed and down the stairs to eat. I dress in a usual outfit; sweatpants and a random t-shirt, adding a hoodie on top. Then with my tattered book bag and dance bag, to go along with it, I head out to the bus stop.

On the bus I plop down next to Toby, ignoring the snickers I hear from the back of the bus. I'm used to it, there are very few people who like me. I don't know why, maybe because of how distant I am? I live with my mom, dad, and my sister, Lila, in an old beat up house we somehow call "home." It's a hard life. Especially since nobody knows my secret except for, Toby and Lexi. Toby and Lexi are my best friends, I wouldn't be able to survive without them. They help me keep my secret safe, like if someone wants to hang out at my house, they offer theirs instead. They both think that I'm audacious, but this is just what I have to do to survive.

"Hello. Earth to Anna, you there? Do, you have dance today?" Toby says interrupting my thoughts.

"What? Oh, yeah hey Toby," I respond tiredly.

"Are you okay?"

"Yeah, Toby I'm fi-" I try to answer him.

"How's home? Is everything okay with your mom, dad, Lila?" Toby asks, I can tell that he is out of breath. I know that he means well, but he can get on my nerves a lot! He literally asks me these same three questions at least once every day. I always answer the last two with little helpless shrugs, the first one I usually tell him that I'm super tired or annoyed, or at least try to. He always interrupts me though, it's starting to get on my nerves. Like honestly, give me some space, let me breath, and let me finish my sentence. To answer these questions I give him a little shrug, even though he thinks that I'm evasive for doing this.

He asks me if I studied, I wonder why I would study. *What do I need to study for? Our math test isn't until Friday of next week.* I ask him why I would need to study, then he reminds me of our vocabulary test that's today! Crap, I forgot all about it. If I don't get a B or higher my parents will kill me. They expect me to get straight A's when it's so loud in our house that I can't even think.

When we get to school I got to my locker since I'm in sixth grade this year, scary right! Then, I head to the guidance office where I meet Ms. London every other day for period 1-2. That's when I have ELA, I'm missing my vocab test! She does this to check on how things are going at home and with my family. She asks things like, *Does your mom still have her job at the pharmacy?* or *How's your sister?*, I hate going there and telling her this stuff it's my information not hers!

After school I start walking to the dance studio, it's a short walk, but I always get lonely. The thing is, I'm worried that I won't be able to dance much longer! We don't have a lot of money, so I have to do odd jobs so, I alone can pay for it. My mom and dad don't even pitch in! Lila has to do the same things with her vocal lessons, she loves to sing. So, it's hard to find people who don't already have people to do these jobs for them.

Finally, the place that I always look forward to, DANCE, I'm here. I enter the girl's locker room to change, I put on a leotard, tutu, and ballet slippers. The leotard is old and barely fits anymore, the tutu I can barely breath in, and then my beautiful ballet slippers, perfect size, brand new, and a silky pink. They were my Christmas present from Lexi, I wanted to give them back, I didn't have anything to repay her with. She said I can repay her by wearing them out, *She is so sweet*, I think. Then I put my hair into a tight bun and head to the dance floor to try and find Lexi. Lexi has been here with me since the very beginning, before things went downhill. She was born in the same hospital room, the same day, the same

time. Then, she was there when my parents lost their money, she didn't leave me because it was too hard like Lila's best friend, she stayed by my side the whole time.

I spot her long, blonde, straight hair that goes all the way down her back. I run up to her, then tap her on the shoulder. She is startled as I jump in front of her. We give each other a big hug as she launches into questions just like Toby. Then after I shrug, we start to do our normal stretches and tell each other about our days. Ms. Green claps her hand and tells us to get ready we're about to try a new move. I have a broad smile on my face when we warm up, this is what I love, it's what I long for every day. When it is my turn to try, I take a big running start....

Then, it happens, I slip. I fall. I cry. I'm paralyzed in horror as the pain rushes through my foot like a lightning bolt. I can't move it hurts too much. The ambulance is here they ask me to stand, I just lay there. Eventually they take out a stretcher, putting me on it carefully as my mom arrives at the scene. Then after waiting in the hospital for what seems like forever, the doctor comes in. I tell him how bad it hurts, I tell him the pain is getting even more excruciating minute after minute. We go to the x-ray room and then I receive the terrible news.

"Anna, I'm so sorry to tell you this, but you've broke your foot. *Terribly*. You may never be able to walk again.

"What?!" I blurted out worriedly. *Wait, no dance? That can't happen, we have a big competition in a year! I need to train for it, also dance is my life. I can't, I just can't leave it behind.* I think all at once.

Once I got my cast on and got crutches, I looked up at my mom, scared, I need comforting. She's looking back at me with the same expression. I'm so relieved, I was afraid she would be angry, she isn't. She is looking at me with a sorrowful look, this is only the second time she's done this. She also did it when we lost our money. Then on the ride home she hugged, kissed, and loved on me all the way home. I felt so good I somehow almost forgot that I had a cast going to my knee, crutches, and I might never be able to walk again. Man, this has been a really bad day!

That night I cried myself to sleep, and no not like a soft quiet cry. It was a messy wet sob, yup a full out sob. My pillow was wet from tears of pain in two ways, physical and mental. No dance? Not even walking? What's going to happen to me?

In the morning I hear a single muffled voice, my mom's on the phone! What about? Is it good? Is it bad? Then I hear a happy scream, to follow it there is another scream. A scream I know. A scream, I fear. That is her scream about money, when something is over our price range. I hear hard, mad footsteps, uh-oh!

"Anna, good and bad news," my mom says tiredly, " Dr. Ray found a way to fix your foot, but it is a lot and I mean a lot of money."

"Are we doing it?" it slips out.

"Yes, we are we will have to use some of your money and ours to manage, but you'll be all better!" she responds with excitement.

"Wait, when?" I ask. then I find out, right now! No preparing or anything. My mom is here, my dad is at work (like always), and Lila is surprisingly here (by force). We are about to start! I feel nauseous, but excited.

Grade 6 Short Story

A Battle to Be Forgotten — 3rd Place Winner By Trezure Trader

It was the winter of 1776. My colony and I were huddled around a campfire devising a plan to attack the British. The harsh conditions we were in left us rigid and feeble. Unfortunately, we did not have a substantial amount of food. The rations we had were meager and most of my troops weren't very fond of them. It was so frigid that eating didn't even occupy most of our thoughts, but we dealt with it anyway.

Instantaneously the wall that was shielding us collapsed. Soon we all ran for our weapons. We then took cover after being ordered by our commander having said "Take cover!" I then looked around as shots rang everywhere. I noticed that many of my troops were falling like dominoes while screaming "Help me!" as they clung to their last bit of life before laying still. In the end American soldiers lay dispersed across the blood-stained battlefield as the British killed those who remained, even those who asked for mercy—but one was spared.

It appeared that the British General Charles Cornwallis had taken a liking to this survivor. She was bound in shackles and was thrown in a cart. She continued to struggle as she attempted to break free of her bonds. She desperately attempted and try as she might she failed. She lay there unconscious not moving. A few hours later she awoke panting. She then heard the cart stop. The tarp that covered her was pulled back. She then looked up and saw the man that spared her life. He stood there beadily staring at her with a wide smile.

"Where are we?" she asked.

"We are in England of course," he said.

"How are we England?" she asked

"You were unconscious for some time," he said.

"Well, why have I been taken here?" she asked.

"I can't tell you," he said.

"Why?" she asked.

"It's classified," he replied.

"Well, I still demand answers!" she exclaimed.

"Who are you?" she asked.

"I am General Charles Cornwallis," said General Cornwallis.

"And you are?" General Cornwallis asked.

"Sarah James," said the girl.

He then drew a fist and knocked Sarah out. She then developed a massive bruise that would continue to be there for as long as she lived. Many hours passed, and Sarah awoke to being in a dark confined space. She could just make out the outline of a figure.

"Where am I now?" she asked.

"You're in the palace of George III," he replied.

“Are you General Cornwallis?” she asked.

“Heavens, no!” the man replied. “I am just a feeble guard.”

Sarah heard a door opening.

“We are ready for her,” said a voice.

“Bring her out,” the voice said again. She saw the guard open the cell door.

“Where am I being taken?” Sarah asked.

“You’ll see soon enough,” the guard said.

“I still have many more questions!” Sarah exclaimed.

“You’ll have them answered soon enough,” the guard said.

The guard grabbed Sarah by her hair and led her into a massive room which in the very front of the room stood King George III.

“I understand that you have been through a lot,” King George III said.

“I have,” Sarah replied.

“I wish to make you my personal servant,” the King said.

“First I wish that you rest,” the King said.

“Guards escort Sarah to her to where she’ll be staying,” the King said.

The guards unbound her of her shackles and Sarah appeared to be extremely relieved. The guards along with Sarah clambered along a flight of stairs to where Sarah would be staying. When the guards reached the door, they threw Sarah into her room harshly. She noticed a mattress in the center of the room. She just decided to rest and laid down upon the mattress. Hours passed, and Sarah awoke to a loud bang striking the palace. Sarah peered out of the window and saw soldiers mounted on cannons firing. Sarah soon rushed out hurriedly down the staircase and outside. She then saw that the troops were steadily approaching the palace.

Two strange figures rushed towards her. Sarah had failed to evade the two figures and they grabbed her and rushed out towards the forest just beyond the palace. They came across a cottage that appeared to have been left in shambles. The two figures dropped her at the foot of a metal door and then a burly man appeared and quickly took her inside. The room was dark until the burly figure lit a candle illuminating the room.

“Where am I?” Sarah asked.

“You’re home, Sarah,” said the burly man whose face looked oddly familiar...it was me. I was the man, and Sarah, my daughter.

Grade 7 Short Story

A New Start — 1st Place Winner

By Aiden Clayton

After that Christmas, the days seemed to drag on for this couple. Della tried to keep a positive mind, but Jim was slowly getting deeper into an endless pit of depression. Days turned to weeks, and weeks turned to months. With Jim's recent mood, it seemed like there was nothing to live for anymore.

Jim was slowly getting less and less paid and was losing his will to provide for his family anymore. And because of this, she didn't want to tell him about the upcoming baby. All of this stacked on to each other was too much to bear and she threw herself upon the bed and sobbed. She recalled doing this same thing only a couple months ago on Christmas Eve. Then, one day he bounded in the door, happier than Della had seen him in months. His face was filled with color and lit.

"Jim dear! You look great!" said Della. Then she noticed the time. It was 4:00 in the afternoon. "But shouldn't you be at work?"

"I quit my job!" he replied, obviously not able to contain his excitement. But I could tell there was more he wanted to say.

"Oh, Jim! How are we going to provide for ourselves?" Della inquired. She knew he hated his job, but she didn't think it was to this degree.

"We're going to start a business." He replied. Although he was very excited, Della was having second thoughts about this.

"But we don't have any extra money to start one, and now that you quit your job, we won't even be able to keep our house for much longer," Della explained.

"I'll find a small side job until we can get something started. It's going to take a lot of work, but I know that we can do it," Jim assured her.

The next day, while Jim was out hunting for a job, Della was searching for something else. She was scavenging all over town for any building that might have some hope as to start a restaurant; if it was functional, she would take it. They didn't have the time or money to be picky.

At last, she saw it. Near the outskirts of town, a run-down, abandoned building sat. It wasn't quite a 5-star hotel, but Della felt that her and Jim could get good use out of it. She walked up onto the parking lot to take a closer look.

The building was a little dirty, and she saw the occasional rat or roach, but she was determined; she called Jim from a pay phone and discovered that he had come across a couple options.

"But Jim! Guess what I found!" Della questioned with unbearable excitement.

"What is it dear?" Jim responded.

"There's an abandoned building on the outskirts of town that I think we can fix up. It'll be perfect!"

"Okay... but who owns it?" Jim retorted.

Della hadn't thought about that. "Hold on for a second." Della let the phone hang and looked around the side of the building to see a sign labeled in big letters:

Property of Aaron Nelson

“Uh oh Jim...” a discouraged Della responded.

“What?”

“This is a Nelson building.” Della heard Jim groan through the phone. The Nelsons were notorious for turning their nose up to any commoners that crossed their path, and there are rumors that they have deals with many gangs and illegal groups.

“It’s worth a shot...” Jim replied, but his voice was far from hopeful.

They went home that night, with hearts full of doubt. They didn’t talk much, fearful of what the next day will bring. Jim had found a small job at a local restaurant and he started tomorrow.

Della went out for coffee with her friend Margret while Jim went to work. She explained the whole situation to her.

“Oh, that’s just great!” Margret exclaimed.

“How is that a good thing?” Della inquired.

“Aaron isn’t part of that family, he just has the same last name. He is an old friend of mine.”

“Really?” Della couldn’t believe what she was hearing.

“And he is moving on to bigger things. He won’t care about that old rickety thing.”

“This is just great!”

“Hold on, I’ll call him.” She went over to the coffee shop’s phone and called his number. Della heard them chatting and then came back. “He said he would sell it to you for \$50!”

“I can’t believe this! This is amazing.”

The day dragged on as she waited for Jim to get home. That night, she told him everything.

“Yes, yes, yes!” Jim exclaimed. He picked up Della and swung her around, then planted a kiss right on her lips. All Della and Jim could do that night was smile and be amazed.

When they got into bed, Jim wrapped his arms around Della, and she snuggled up close to him.

“We might actually be able to do this,” Della whispered. For the first time, they had some real hope...

Godly Parent— 2nd Place Winner **By Simrain Jain**

It’s funny how a few words can change everything. A few hours ago, my worst worries were playing volleyball in gym and my math test, now the whole world seems to be spinning. But I’m getting ahead of myself, it all started this morning or what now feels like centuries ago.

“Happy Birthday, baby,” called my Dad. I turned 13 today, but my birthdays only made me more curious about my mother. My father never talks about her. All I know is that she left me with him after I was born and has never visited since then. The only thing I have from her is an Om necklace that I have never taken off. Every time I asked about her Dad changes the subject. I don’t even have a picture of my mother.

“I’m 13 Dad, no longer a baby,” I told him.

“To me you will always be a baby. It feels like you were born yesterday,” he said lovingly. Then his tone turned deadly serious and he talked about the one thing he had never spoken of, my mother. “Your mother left you a gift to open,” he announced while handing me a small box.

I just stood there stunned until I uttered, “Thank you.” I opened the box with extreme fragility and found a small earthen lamp and a note that read; *To my dear child, only light the lamp when you are most desperate, it will guide you to safety. Love, Mom.* I went to ask my Dad what this meant, but he had already left for work. I decided to place the note and lamp away in my book bag and head to school.

The second I got on the bus something seemed wrong. My senses were heightened, and I could feel my brain telling me to run as fast and far as I could. I ignored those thoughts until the bus was hit by a what others told me was a car. No, it was not a car. When I looked, I saw a monster like nothing I’ve never seen before. I screamed in horror, but nobody else saw it when I pointed; they just thought I had a concussion from the crash. It was only when I realized that the monster was coming towards me that I listened to my instincts and decided to flee from the bus. As I ran, I hoped the thing would forget about me, but it just came closer. I hid behind a car desperately thinking of what to do while the demon creature searched for me. Then, I realize I was clutching my om necklace. This made me think of my mother’s letter and gift. I knew it was unrealistic that a lamp left by my mother, who had abandoned me, would help me survive that creature. But then again, it was also unrealistic that some demon creature was hunting me. I was out of options and this definitely counted as “*most desperate,*” so I pulled out the lamp and lit it. Suddenly, a glowing portal appeared in front of me drawing the creature's attention, but I leaped into the portal before it could catch me.

When I landed on the other side of the portal, it closed before the creature could follow me. As relieved as I was about losing the creature, I was still equally frightened and confused as to why all of this had happened. I picked myself up and saw a huge sign that had *Camp Vedas* written on it in English and Hindi. When I walked beyond the sign my surroundings changed to a campus area with buildings and cabins.

A random guy walked up to me and said in a bored tone, “Welcome to Camp Vedas, which Deva or Devi is your godly parent?” he asked as if he was asking where I wanted to sit in a restaurant. After five minutes of me staring at him with my jaw dropped, he sighed and asked, “Do you know how you got here?”

All I could do was stutter.

“You’ve clearly had a scare so why don’t we sit down, and you can tell me the story. Then we’ll figure out who your parent is and get you settled in,” he said gently.

We went to a dining hall and I slowly recounted the events of the morning while he listened sympathetically. When I was finished, he gently started to explain everything that had happened, but my head seemed to be spinning even as I knew in my heart, he was telling the truth. “The creature that was chasing you was an asura or a demon. Today was your thirteenth birthday when many demigods’ powers mature and the asuras can sense it. The oil lamp you used to get here is a temporary portal to Camp Vedas. Since your mother gave it to you, that means she is one of the Devis, or goddess, and that makes you a demigod. Camp Vedas is a sanctuary for Hindu demigods to live at and learn about their culture when they come of age. We have nine cabins for the children of Brahma, Vishnu, Shiva, Ganesh,

Lakshmi, Maya, Agni, Parvati, Indra, and Yama. I know you are confused, but everything's going to be fine. I'm Vikram, son of Vishnu, but you can call me Viki," he introduced himself. I shook his hand and thanked him for his kindness.

I don't think I've ever been more thankful than when Viki got me some food and found an empty bed for me to nap in after my long morning. I woke up to strange sounds coming from the dining hall. Dragging myself out of bed I found a large group of unique kids around my age shouting and cheering as some participated in challenges.

"Good you're up! Now we can determine which goddess is your parent and get you placed in a cabin," Viki said as he approached me. I followed him as he headed toward the center of the group. Viki whispered, "Don't worry you'll do great," one second before he thrust me onto a stage.

In a booming voice a middle-aged woman who resembled the principal called out, "Newest member of Camp Vedas you are summoned before the council of elders to complete the trials as your brothers and sisters have to find your place amongst us and determine your future." All I could do was stand there, a statue of awkwardness looking out towards the crowd of observers, some of them had mischief in their eyes. Others looked sympathetically at me, but when I looked at Vikram he smiled and gave me a thumbs up.

I refused to show my fear, so I bellowed, "Then let the trials begin."

The first trial was called "*The Inquiry of Gifts*," where I was required to choose amongst an array of items while blindfolded. I was also not allowed to touch the objects, but rather had to use my intuition to figure out which item I was inherently towards. When, I removed my blindfold I found myself holding gold coins. Everyone cheered and the judges looked inquisitively at each other. I had no clue what this meant.

Next came the trial of "*Determination of Defenders*," where I was once again bound and blindfolded but placed in a small arena with no idea about what was going to happen. Suddenly, I heard the growling of a creature I didn't want to meet. I screamed but it was swallowed by the crowd's blood thirsty roars. I heard Viki's voice yell, "Connect with a protector to survive." It was then that I felt the presence of many different animals around me, but there was only one that I was drawn to. The owl soared to my side, letting me take control of its body and use its senses to fight off the creator attacking me. I leaped out of the way while the owl landed on the creature's head and clawed at its eyes, once it was down the owl pecked at its chest until the beating of its heart could no longer be heard. I ripped off the blindfold and celebrated with the owl. It felt like he was a lost friend. Once the trials were over, I had never felt more like myself.

"Based on the results of the trials this girl must be prophesied daughter of Lakshmi." In that moment everything changed knowing that my mother was the goddess of wealth, power, luxury, and auspiciousness.

After the celebrations of my new life were over, all I could think of was my mother, Lakshmi. That night I dreamt of her. "*I'm sorry I couldn't be there for you growing up, but I could have never expected you would grow up to be such an amazing young woman,*" my mother told me.

"*Now I understand why you were never there, but I still wished I could spend more time with you,*" I said sorrowfully.

"I will always be with you. Every time you wear red and yellow, plant lotus flowers, or connect with your owl you are doing our favorite things," she sang beautifully. It was then that I knew I would be just fine.

***I'll Be There for You* — 3rd Place Winner** **By Zarriah S. Tobias**

"Zayda? Are you awake?" A familiar voice woke me. My eyes were heavy, and my throat was dry. When I finally got my eyes fully open, I saw it was my sister Tara. My black and grey clock on my nightstand glowed 2:03 am.

"Tara? It's two in the morning. What's going on?" My sister would never wake me up this late unless something was happening.

"I don't know how you aren't awake! Liam has been calling you non-stop. He finally called me to wake you and call him." Tara explained. I rubbed my arms and looked to the other side of my room where my mirror was. My hair looked scruffy.

"Pierce's brother? Why would he be calling me?" I asked confused. I couldn't see Tara's expression only her silhouette, but she seemed annoyed.

"How would I know?" She shoved my phone into my face. "Just call him, please. You know how he is with me." I rolled my eyes. She mostly hates Liam because he's always teasing her, and Tara is very sensitive.

"Fine! Please just leave." I sighed. I could see her pale palms throw up into the air as she turned to walk out. I slowly got up with my phone in hand, opening it to the home page. Walking over to my light switch I started searching the missed call list for Liam's number. He had called seventeen times. With the phone to my ear, I adjusted my shorts and after the first two rings, Liam answered.

"Zayda!" Liam yelled. I rolled my eyes to the sound of his voice.

"What's going on, Liam?" I sighed. He went on to explain Pierce had gone to a party in my neighborhood and I needed to bring him home. When I asked why he couldn't do it himself, he merely explained he was unable to drive high after getting a DUI last year. *You shouldn't drive high under any circumstance anyway.* I didn't have the guts to tell him that.

I pulled my Lil Peep "Hell Girl" sweater on, black jeans with fishnet on the rips, and jammed my feet into some slip-on Vans shoes. I jogged down the stairs whilst my keys jiggled loudly to the beat of my steps. My 2015 jeep was waiting in the driveway for me to start it up. But I stopped for a moment, standing in the cool breeze of fall. Was I really going to a party to retrieve Pierce Coldwater when I could be sleeping in preparation for my vital but frustrating education? In fact, I was. I truly did care for the Coldwaters.

The party's location was predictable. Zander Jones always had the biggest ragers in *my* town, in *my* neighborhood, near *my* house. Zander was a wrestler at Bella Vista High, but graduated last year. He seemed nice when he wasn't having temper tantrums. The Jones' residence is a very eye pleasing sight. The clay grey bricks, black accents, and bay windows weren't common in Bella Vista, the town where us anomalistic citizens reside. In 2007, Bella Vista was voted the weirdest town in Arizona. I knew what they meant. They didn't mean our events or traditions were weird, they meant *we* were. I guess when I

moved here things seemed all right but getting to know everyone, I had made an eminent discovery that 'things' were everything but normal here.

When I arrived, the house blared \$uicideBoy\$, an artist I listened to frequently. The house appeared to shake while people jumped around and screamed the lyrics to Paris. After squeezing through the crowded foyer, I began to ask around for Pierce. I spoke to Holly, a ginger senior, but she hadn't seen him since one-thirty. I turned the corner and peered into the kitchen. I saw Zander sitting on a bar stool at the island in the middle of the kitchen. He smiled and waved to me. I smiled and calmly walked over.

"Where has your misfit self been lately?" Zander asked me while fluffing his dark hair to the side. I always had a liking for his looks, the grey eyes and stunning jawline, but he didn't have the greatest personality.

"Slowly dying." I responded taking a seat next to him. He laughed for a while and I let him, because I was searching for something else to say. "I'm currently looking for one of your invitees, though."

"Yeah, of course. Who are we searching for?" I told him Pierce needed to be home, but Liam couldn't come because he's 'in the clouds' currently. Zander asked me what I meant by 'in the clouds' and I had to explain it since he doesn't smoke. It didn't bother me that I had to, for some reason I assumed he would have known. Zander told me some places to check, and he went off in the other direction. My list was under the sunroom couch, the game room, back and front porch, and Justin's room. Justin was also an infamous Coldwater, Zander's brother. I had no idea why Pierce would be with him. I'm guessing contraband, but I shouldn't assume things like that. I don't remember Pierce ever being like his brother in that way.

It took 15 straight minutes of searching to find him. I called to Zander and he came behind me. He was right, Pierce was sitting on the front porch. But he was alone in the dark, seeming to be lost in a sea of his own thoughts and wishes. When we both stepped out into the night Zander gave me a sympathetic look. Pierce looked up but turned away quickly. He seemed to flinch at the sight of us. Or at the sight of Zander? I nodded to Zander that he should leave. As he walked into the house his shoes scrapped the wooded floor. He never did pick up his feet. And he never did look back.

"Pierce?" I said wearily through the warm breeze. He looked up a bit from his shoes but almost immediately turned away. I'd never seen him like this, what's going on with my once joyful friend. Who did this?

"You shouldn't be here. We have school tomorrow, Zayda." He said picking his head up a little but still turned away from me. He was right. I shouldn't be here, but neither should he. I walked over trying to keep my steps quiet and sat on the ground in front of him, my head against the beam that held the porch roof and his head against the house.

"Don't do this." I whispered.

"Do what?" Pierce scoffed.

"Shut me out. Do not shut me out. Now tell me what's going on." He finally looked at me. His pained eyes looked dim. Pierce took a long breath and began to talk.

“Liam is stealing all my friends away because I don’t smoke with them. I can’t give in to the peer pressure like my brother did. You saw how he turned out. That’s the whole reason he isn’t here, and you are.”

I didn’t know what to say. How could I ask him to talk to me when I didn’t even know how to *respond*? I really messed this up now. I just scooted over to him and put my head on his shoulder. Pierce got up and leaned against the wall. I was offended but he isn’t in the best place so, I let it slide. I also stood up and he stared off into the distance, like one of those Hollywood movie characters in a heavy scene. I was just about to say something when Pierce walked past me and extended his arm shoving me into the front door frame. At this point I was starting to get mad. But he began to run across the lawn so, I followed. Close behind him, he ran out into the street. The orange lights glowed onto the dark road, turning nearby tree leaves golden. Porch lights showed off the rich people’s yards and new cars in the driveway. The wind was starting to pick up, so I hugged my arms to my chest. I saw a car coming slowly down the road, coming from the clubhouse. I quickly grabbed Pierce’s sweatshirt sleeve and pulled him into the grass. He tripped on the curb and pulled me to the ground right with him. We both staggered trying to regain balance but failed.

“That wasn’t the full story was it?” I asked leaning in closer, trying to seem comforting like a psychologist. He turned and grabbed my arm I looked down but glanced back up at him. Tears streamed down his face. I sat surprised and immediately heart broken.

I never found out why Pierce flinched away from Zander, or exactly why he was upset, or why he grabbed my hand, or why he was at the party. Could I have comforted him? Or was it just one of those “you can’t help me right now” things? But I did start to understand why I did all those things for the Coldwater’s last night. I didn’t like myself, but I wanted something to *like* and care for. They seemed like a troubled family and in need of help. Well, not “in need” but, I viewed it that way. I guess my journey for self-love isn’t over but, everyone gets there at some point, right? I hope so. That feeling of emptiness settled incorrectly. Anguish.

Grade 8 Short Story

In the End — 1st Place Winner

By Isabella Scheeler

In Loving Memory of Billy Miller

Did he know what he was doing when he ended it all? Stripping away a life from this earth. Is this what he really wanted? Death? Or was it his only way out, his only solution, the end to his pain and suffering? How could he do this to us? Why? We all have so many questions we ask one another: “What were you doing when you got the call? Did you say anything?” For me there was nothing I could say. Nothing I could do to bring him back. It was one of those moments where I was speechless and numb and tense all at the same time. One of those moments I never wanted to feel. Ever. But it was there. It was real. And it was drowning us all.

I couldn't help but to wonder why? I couldn't do anything but go over the questions over and over and over again. Still today, so many questions are unanswered. My life changed in the time it took for a phone to ring. I wish I could ask him questions: "Did God support you in your decision? Are you comfortable where you are?"

At the service, a thousand people showed up and poured love and support for him and the family. People waited patiently to have their turn with the microphone to tell a story, a memory, an anecdote. There were so many, I lost count. Some laughter along with the tears, some happiness along with the pain, because how could we be so sad remembering someone who always made us so happy? I remember the rows of us sitting there, crammed into the building like sardines, listening to what everyone had to say. So many of us honoring the life that was no longer here. The tears and empty tissue boxes everywhere. The days were blurry. The sadness was suffocating us.

It was November 28th, 2017. I was cutting pieces of pine off of the tree in my front yard; Christmas was coming soon and my grandmother and I were making wreaths. I heard the phone ring, so I ran inside to pick it up. It was my aunt asking to talk to her sister (my grandmother). She sounded like something was wrong, so I ran out and handed her the phone. That phone call changed us forever. The words coming out of my grandmother's mouth as she hung up the phone and called all the family into the room, they crushed us. Not knowing what to say or do, we all sat around hugging each other, crying. The next day we went to Jersey to be with our family; it made it even harder to see how broken they were. Seeing where he lived, how he wasn't there. Seeing his bike he would ride all over Cape May, and him not on it. Wanting so desperately for this pain to end. Crying myself to sleep the following days. Going back to school was hard. Going back to normal, like nothing happened, was very difficult. For his close family, it was even harder. His mom and sister were talking before she went to go to the store and his mom said, "Don't forget Billy's cigarettes," because reality hadn't set in all the way.

When he took his life, he didn't take away the pain that haunted him. He only put it on everyone who knew and loved him. Losing someone to death is one of the worst, most painful experiences one can endure in their life, but losing someone to suicide is worse because you know that this person was so deeply hurt and there was nothing you did to help them. If only we knew. If only he could've stayed. If only we could have called. These questions haunt us. Maybe this would've stopped him. Maybe we could've prevented it that one time but who's to say he wouldn't have tried it again? Who's to say if that only would have brought him more pain?

Now as I sit here a year later on November 28th, 2018, and the hurt we all feel is still as real as it was 365 days ago. Thinking back to the days before when we we're living life normally, what was he thinking? What was he feeling? What made him get to this point? We may never know. Was he feeling worthless or like the world would be better off without him? If that was what he felt, we all know that wasn't the truth. How could he ever have thought these things?

He was a beautiful person but was just so haunted. The bartender. The friend. Billy boy. He had a smile that lit up a room the moment he walked in; he was like a father to the ones who didn't have one. He was a son who was loved so deeply by his mother and father. He was a brother who would do anything for his siblings. He was such an amazing person. And to me he was a cousin I loved. This is what we know and we're not wrong about this. Not at all, but we didn't know the thoughts in his head.

We didn't know the pain in his heart. The ways he tried comforting himself just brought him down more. And eventually he couldn't do it anymore. So I am faced with my final question...

In the end, was it all worth it?

***Toy Story* — 2nd Place Winner**
By Emily Leon

One of my best friends went missing about two years ago. Whenever people say things like "I'm so sorry", or "I know what you're going through" it makes my nerves twist. Empathy killed the cat, am I right? I still have dreams about seeing her in her purest angelic form. Her laugh in sync with the ocean, her hair as golden as if it was spun right from the center of the sun, her eyes as green as the purest gem found in the darkest cave, a gem that has yet to be discovered. No matter how much her family and I begged the police, they would not reopen the case. I remember going with her family, sometimes going alone, to the station to wait, for hours, just to talk to the police about any lead we might've had. Since it was two years ago, my memory is kind of foggy. But if you had spent any time with her, you could never forget her. She was just that type of person.

I remember the last day we were together though, I could never forget it even if I tried. I had spent the night at her house the day before and we were walking around her neighborhood together when it started to rain. Rain was her favorite weather. She said it made her feel an escape from the reality she lived in. Or that's what she told me anyway. Sometimes she had this way with words, making everything she said seem true. "Let me go inside my house real quick and get my coat", she said. "I'll go with you", I suggest as she was already turning around to go back to her house. "No it's okay", she said and started jogging back to her house, leaving me to soak in the middle of her neighborhood street.

Those were the last words she ever said to me. Ever. I can think of every mistake I had made that day. It haunts me to know I was the last one to see her that day. I can still see her aura fighting to make its mark against the dark, gloomy sky. I was so stunned and so angry she would do something like that in the moment I had my mother pick me up. Nowadays I can never go anywhere and see something that doesn't remind me of her. From things like a billboard advertising a certain shampoo she used, to a flake of snow that was unique and different from every other snowflake. Every so often I walk around town, hoping to see a familiar girl with blonde hair bobbing through the waves of people. My family wanted to send me to therapy, but I could never bring myself to talk to a stranger about how guilty I feel. Her family was always friendly to me, but since I was the last person to see her, I know they are suspicious of me. I know they would never say this to my face but living in a small town means word spreads quickly. No one I know of, knows how I feel, and is lucky enough to not to experience anything even close to that. My mother wants me to get out of the house more, she claims it's good for me, and sent me to the antique store across the street to buy a doll for my grandmother. I would never tell anyone this but the man that owns it creeps me out. He looked about in his mid-forties and rumor has it that he went to jail for a few years. I remembered when I was just a little kid, about five or six years old, I was walking to the grocery store with my mom when I first saw him, walking on the opposite side of the street, looking like he was looking for someone. He had shoulder length, greasy hair and beady brown

eyes. I had a bad feeling going alone to the antique store that day. Maybe it's just because of what happened to my friend, but it's like I suddenly had become aware of even the slightest danger and remained on edge, I opened the door to the shop and heard the little brass bell ring above. He immediately looked up from the novel he was reading and made eye contact with me. It was something about the way he looked at me.

"I'm looking for a doll", I told him, not in the mood for small talk.

"Down the hall and the first turn on your left", he said while still staring at me. Something behind his beady eyes was sinister. I should have left the store right then and not looked back. But instead I gave him a small nod and followed his directions. The first doll I saw was stunning. The porcelain doll was about 5 feet tall with long black hair and olive toned skin. The next doll was gorgeous as well with chocolate skin and beautiful lush hair. I couldn't put my finger on it. There was something so human like about these dolls. The third doll sent chills down my spine. She had long golden hair that was very human like. Her eyes were a bright green with a hint of life still in them. I fell back into the shelf behind me, causing some of the dolls to fall and break.

That was my friend. I was so sure of it. The room went dark and I realized what was going on. A week later my parents filed a missing persons' report.

Grade 8 Short Story

Silver Freedom — 3rd Place Winner

By Breanne Ferguson

Two years.

Two years of broken cots.

Two years of looking out rusted bars.

Two years of prison.

I was tired of it.

My mother cried when I was born, not because of happiness, but of hatred because I was born with silver eyes and blond hair. Despised, because I was born in a world of brown eyes. Terrified, because she didn't know what I was capable of. But she must have felt some sort of empathy because she hid me. For 14 years she hid me by keeping me locked in the house. When the officials came to see the child, she cried in a horrendous mess, "The child is dead; my sweet baby girl is dead. She never saw the beautiful sky or the wonders of our great country." Sobbing, crying, and pouring her heart out into the act, my mother seemed really like a mother who had lost her child.

The officials believed her. They didn't ask questions, and left the woman crying at her doorstep. The protocol was to see the child, dead or alive, but they couldn't bear to hurt the mother more.

I had no education, never really met my siblings, and hardly saw my parents. It's not like they loved me; I was different, I soon learned humans have no empathy for those who are different. After my father's death they blamed me for bad luck brought on family. So, when the officials came when I was around 14 once again, I assume my brother told the officials without hesitation. I screamed, I cried, I even

clawed at the official's hand as he yanked me out of the house and shoved me into the back of a van with so much force, I sprained my wrist. After an hour of driving I arrived here, where I am right now, a prison camp.

Just because I had silver eyes and blonde hair.

The first night I cried. I was in a dusty crowded tent filled with people of the same hair and eye color all around my age. Some gave me sympathetic looks, others looked away. But one girl sat by me. She had burnt almond skin that was thinly stretched across her small emaciated frame. She helped me through the night with stories and hand games. Her name was Rosepop. She made me laugh on the worst night of my life. After that we were inseparable. And I stayed in that camp for another two years.

I'm tired of it.

I sat up to the sound of gunshots, something that was all too familiar to me. Someone probably tried to climb the fence again and died in the attempt. There won't be a funeral, no one will mourn them. If anything, they would admire them, that person knew they would die when they climbed the fence. We aren't that brave.

We were all afraid to die.

I climbed out of the cot, careful not to wake Rosepop, and put on my shoes. We started to share a cot when a newcomer didn't have a place to sleep. I walked outside the tent and walked over to the meal section, carefully avoiding my eyes from a 13 Winters old girl lying beside the fence. Other tent members all went out to grab their baskets of food. I grabbed a basket marked "TENT 14 RATION 1" and made my way back. There were a few people already awake staring at me as I entered the tent. The basket had 13 packets of food, one for each person. But our tent has 14 people and a 10 Winters girl verge of death from malnutrition. I gave up my packet, as I usually do to the child and woke Rose to get her meal.

"We can't do this anymore Envy is going to die, and Ebony hasn't won the woken up for hours," protested a 15 Winters guy, his dark complexion pleading for something to be done.

"What can we do, the last person who asked for more rations wasn't allowed food the entire week." I said exhausted, there really is nothing we can do.

"Abigaia we have to do something! They're going to starve us out!"

"Oh, please tell me what to do Sa'id! Will we lead a revolution against those who will shoot us on the spot? Please do go on!" I said in an exasperated sarcastic tone.

Sa'id backed off and went back to caring for Envy silently. I didn't want to yell at him but it's not like he would listen if I didn't. But he did have a point, something had to change. I sat next to Rose wondering how to do something. The only thing that could shift into our favor is our minds.

I scanned the kids in our tent, everyone has the same blond hair, silver eyes, gaunt frames, dusty clothing and broken shoes. The total opposite of what you expect someone to fear. But maybe there was something there.

"I'm sorry," I snapped at you Sa'id, "you were right. We can't just wait around." I said, picking up the group's empty food containers, "Something is going to change, starting today."

"Well what are we going to do?" Asked Rosepop confused.

"A peaceful protest," I answered, "Show them we won't coward to their rule."

"What if they hurt us?" She asked.

“They can't wipe an entire tent out, they rely on us for labor and it would destroy their profits. We strike today, before labor, it won't be too hard and I'm not forcing anyone to go with me.” I said.

“I'm with you Abigaia.” said Rosepop

“So am I.” said Sa'id smiling.

“We're with you” echoed several members of the camp.

I look at everyone and grin.

Today we'll be free.

Grade 9 Short Story

Goodbye — 1st Place Winner

By Rosy Gao

I've learned that it's so hard to say goodbye.

Even a simple adieu, a fluttering of the fingers, can take an immense amount.

I brush away a tear and let myself remember *that day*, that now seems so long, long ago.

I was ten when my parents left. It was 6:00 in the morning, and my parents, my brother, and I were at the Airway Travel Port #9. It had still been dark when we had left our small house and rode the glass-windowed Maglev Rail high over the still-asleep city. Had I known it was to be the last time, I would have savored it more. Nevertheless, what I did understand was that after that day, my parents and I would be separated for a long, long time. I held my breath as we entered the port. The port was more grandiose than anything we'd ever seen before, but we were too dazed to be fascinated. We quickly checked in and proceeded to our departure gate. Only then did I note the port's magnificence. We were at Gate #11, the Central Gate, with a circular waiting area. Cobalt blue chairs. Red granite tiles lined the walls that ran two or three stories up, topped with a dome painted to mimic the night sky. A polished cream-colored floor. And in the center of it all, a white marble fountain. This was the port's largest gate, fitting for the destination where the ship would take its passengers.

Mars.

It was a trip of no return, a one-way ticket. But my parents had chosen to spend the rest of their lives on the lonely, beautiful red planet.

I felt a soft tap on my shoulder. I turned around.

“Be a good girl, Adriette,” my mother said.

I nodded, slowly, almost as if I was not comprehending what was happening.

“We'll send for you soon,” my father assured.

“Take good care of your brother while we're gone,” my mother told me.

I looked at my brother, Jonathan. He was just six years old. Would he still remember our parents?

We exchanged murmured condolences, and before we knew it, it was time to board. My mother and father looked at me one last time and turned away, heading toward the large, tinted gate, where the ominous ship waited.

I choked back a sob but was determined to not let myself cry.

Be brave, Adriette, I told myself as I grit my teeth.

I raised my hand, but I found it the hardest to wave. I could not bring myself to say good-bye.

Only when the ship was fully boarded did a silent tear slip down my face.

I felt numb. I did not notice when the ship took off, despite the loud *boom!* that followed, and neither did I see any of the faces in the large crowd.

I looked at my brother. Jonathan was more solemn than usual. I slipped my hand in his and we turned away, walking through the crowd to our new home.

It had been six years since that day. For 6 years, we stayed at the Center for the Waiting Relief, the white-walled home for the families of those who were away in the port. It was a lonely life. We went through the same routines every day. Get up, go to the school inside of the port Center, online lessons, eat, sleep. Repeat. I could not face the port again, and always left the Center through the entrance that led to the busy streets of the city.

Two years after my parents' departure, when Jonathan and I were walking hand in hand through the people-filled streets, his hand was released from my grasp, stolen, slipping away like a distant memory. I was all alone.

But I found a friend. Rachel's brother, sister, and father, had all left for Mars 14 years ago, leaving Rachel and her mother waiting and hoping in the quiet, pristine Center. They are standing next to me today.

Here I am again, at the Central Gate. The same blue chairs and red granite wall tiles. The sconces of light on the wall seem to glow a little brighter and the water in the fountain splashes a little harder this time. Only now, the port does not seem so resplendent. It seems remorseful.

"We'll miss you. Will you call us?" asks Rachel.

"Every week," I assure her.

Boarding is called.

Rachel raises her hand and opens her mouth, but stops herself. Perhaps she cannot say goodbye.

Just then, a pang of angst hits me. Do I really want to leave Earth? No matter how lonely or painful these years on Earth have been, Earth has still been my home.

No, I cannot go.

"Have a safe trip!" Rachel's mom, Miss Margaret, calls.

But a new life awaits me. Mars is a new place with new opportunities. I can finally see my parents again. This is what I've been waiting all of these patient years for.

I thank Miss Margaret.

I must move forward.

"Goodbye," I say.

I walk through the tinted gate, the gate to my future. I take one last look at Earth and board the ship.

Grade 9 Short Story

2071— 2nd Place Winner

By Madeline Umsted

Dancing within the disco-like trance induced by, “She’s Gonna Leave You” by The Walkers which was blaring overhead on the speakers, I swayed and shook while my friends all hid anywhere they could to distance themselves from me. Singing along, I skipped away to investigate their hiding spots, giggling at the thought. On my way, I crossed paths with a mirror and with a passing glance, saw glowing crimson eyes and the slight beginnings of a smile reflected at me.

How did this happen?

The year 2071, and the world isn’t as great as people in the past wished it to be. A place overrun with poverty interrupted by the few wealthy, addiction, abuse, and chaos everywhere you’d turn. But in the small town of Duanity located at an undisclosed location, there was a haven. A haven for the young to learn and grow, and perhaps someday make our country more bearable to live in. It would be here along many other locations like Duanity that a religious cult would release a deadly vapor that would spread a fierce disease. My name is Rex. And this is the story of how the United States was obliterated in the span of a few hours, all by its own people.

I was riding my bike to head to my part-time job at the local farmer’s market when my friend Irene showed up, jogging alongside my bike.

“Get off.... the bike...!” she huffed and puffed, “we need...to get to.... Town Square!”

Wholeheartedly trusting my friend, I hopped off and headed to the square, dragging my bike alongside me and chatting with Irene. She had no idea why we had to, only she heard from Christy who heard from her boyfriend Adam who heard from his buddy Jason that there was a life changing message to be shown throughout the world on live television. Along the way we found Christy arguing with Adam about something. Jogging behind them was Jason.

I heard Irene sigh faintly beside me. I turned my head instantly and shot her a knowing look, winking and announcing loudly, “Oh Jason! How are you this *fine* summer morning?”

Irene was furious but quickly changed into mask so sweet it made my teeth ache as she saw Jason jogging over to us.

“Not too bad, although I wish I knew what exactly this,” Jason stopped to make air quotes, “‘life changing message’ was.”

This quirked Adam’s ear, leading him over to us and leaving Christy to argue with the air. His face lit up and broke into that cute smile I knew so well. “I heard it’s from a terrorist! Or maybe about nuclear warfare! Or a—

“Or m-maybe it’s an a-alien race saying they’re g-going to *blow up the Earth!*” I interjected fearfully, causing everyone but Adam to laugh, who looked at me in a deadpan manner and said, “Ha ha. Very funny. Not.”

Leaping onto my bike I yelled, “Aww, but you laughed! You think it’s funny!” and sped away, hearing Adam yell, “REX!” and the pounding footsteps of my friends as we all neared the square. I

could hear Christy's whining tone behind me. I scoffed, wondering how Adam could be dating a girl like *her*. There are way better women out there, including...

My thoughts were cut off as I arrived at the square. I saw the huge cobblestone square underneath my feet which was surrounded by merchants and local shops. But an unusual addition was a huge TV screen in the middle of the square. Apparently, gossip spread quickly as there was already children, teens, and young adults squished in between each other as they waited anxiously for the screen to turn on, faces reflected with nerves and fear rippled throughout the crowd.

My friends all in different states of disarray hobbled up to me, Irene smacking my shoulder. "Rex! You're an absolute jerk!"

I laughed and was about to fire back a friendly insult of my own when the screen flickered to life. The screen itself was black except for an insignia of a wild dog holding a cross in its mouth like a bone.

A distorted voice floated out from hidden speakers in the square, "We are the God Hounds. We wish to lead you all into the light under the duty of God. We wish to save your pathetic souls and cement your future. To do that, God has gifted us a...surprise to share."

It was at that moment a small plane flew above us, dropping a large glass bottle covered with yellow paper and a crude smile drawn onto it which floated slowly to the ground due to a small parachute.

"Today is the day we welcome the rest of you to paradise." Hysterical laughter ensued as the screen changed to the picture of a doodled smile. I looked around, seeing the question on everyone's face; who would approach the bottle? A man in his early twenties heroically walked over to the bottle and picked it up, holding it gingerly. He opened the bottle and that was when all hell broke loose.

He almost immediately fell to the ground, the bottle shattering. Seconds later his arms and legs bent backwards at unnatural positions like a spider and his head snapped backwards; glowing red eyes and a smile so wide it was inhuman. Leaping up among cracks of his body, he started singing an unrecognizable tune as he went after the people nearby. He'd break their necks, smiling all the while, and others he'd bite, resulting in those poor people dropping to the ground and turning into what he had become.

The thick, suffocating scent of blood filled the air along with the sounds of laughter, singing, and the sick snapping of bone. Using my shirt to cover my mouth and nose, I abandoned my bike and ran from the square, as far as I could to get away from the death and those crimson eyes. I vaguely acknowledged footsteps behind me but kept running.

Far enough away I could only faintly hear the occurrences in the square, I stopped in front of the newly built supermarket. Turning around, I saw Irene, Adam, and Jason all with unknown substances on them, hair wild, and eyes wide.

Adam looked around and exclaimed, "Where's Christy?! We have to go back for her!"

Jason looked to him with apologetic eyes and merely whispered, "We can't risk it, Adam. I'm so sorry."

Barely holding it together, Adam went inside the store. Irene and Jason followed, as I stayed outside to check for any other possible entrances to seal. Afterwards I went inside. It was a classic

supermarket; shelving with items towards the back, cash registers in the front, with bathrooms and a room that controlled the electricity, alarms, etc.

“Jason, can you help me push shelves towards the door? And Irene, can you collect any items necessary from the aisles?” I said, taking charge of the situation.

As everyone quickly went to their jobs, I noticed Adam was nowhere to be found. The question visible on my face, Jason said, “In the restroom.” I saw on his face not to question further.

“Ah.” I replied.

Eventually night fell, and we decided that after fixing the ventilation so that it could filter the outside air, to just go sleep in the aisles, as everyone was too shocked to eat. Irene had found air mattresses and blankets. Irene and Jason immediately went to separate aisles, but I stayed awake and went into the employees’ restroom to take a shower.

Steam filled the room and I saw the slightly muscular outlined body of a man. As the door shut softly behind me, the steam slightly cleared and there was Adam, with only a towel on his waist, blonde hair dripping wet.

He turned around as I started blushing wildly, “Ah I-I’ll leave y-you’re obviously in h-here.”

His face turned slightly red; whether it was because of the heat or because of my surveying his body I couldn’t tell.

“It’s fine. What do you need?” Having a tight hold on his towel he took a defensive stance.

“Well, I was going to take a shower but now I want to know if you’re okay. I mean with Christy...” I said, noticing how he flinched when I mentioned her name. I winced, “Too soon?”

He ran his fingers through his hair, but relaxed. “No, it’s okay. I had been arguing with her before the God Hounds’ message. And I guess I need to let you know.” He looked up at me, “I had told Christy that I was breaking up with her.”

I walked over to him, “Why should that matter to me?”

He laughed which showed his adorable smile. “You’re not subtle at all. I knew. I *know*.”

I laughed nervously. “Know what? I don’t know what you’re talking about.” I waved him away.

He got even closer, gently taking me by the chin. “You like me, dummy. And you know what? I just might be fine with that.” Then he exited the room, smirking softly.

As the door closed shut I snapped out of the daze he had put me in and went over to the shower, turning on the hot water.

“Snap out of it Rex! It’s just! It’s...” But there was nothing I could do. I kept thinking and wondering that even in this disaster, could love blossom?

...

Quite early in the morning, I was awoken by the sound of a fist banging on glass.

“Adam! Jason! Irene! Rex! Are you in there?!” I heard a feminine voice and shot out of bed. I moved slowly towards the front of the building where the voice was coming from, remaining out of sight of the front door. Nearby in the shadows was Adam.

“Do you know who?” I mouthed to him.

He mouthed back, “I think it’s...” he stopped for a second but then looked back confusedly, “Christy?!?”

Peeking slightly out from my shelving hiding place, I caught a glance of long red hair and an upset face. I pulled back and mouthed to Adam, "It is!"

Adam stood up and walked towards the door, cautiously.

"Adam! What are you doing?!" I whisper-screamed, "What if she's infected?!"

He gave me a look that conveyed what he couldn't say; that it was going to be okay and not to worry. And in that one look I told him that I would always worry, but I trusted him.

"Christy?" Adam said. His voice caused Irene and Jason to come out from the aisles, sleepy but confused looks on their faces. I noted Jason's arm wrapped around Irene. Wonder what happened to her last night...

Christy looked to Adam. "Adam! You need to let me in! There's terrifying creatures out here!"

Jason yelled from behind, "Don't do it! We don't know if she's infected!"

Adam got closer and so did I from the opposite side. "Can't you see it? I'm me." She begged, looking deep into his eyes.

I almost believed her, except I saw for a split second a flash of red cross her eyes. "Get back! She's one of them!" I screamed, but it was too late. Christy's eyes turned fully red, and her smile grew wide.

Breaking through the glass door and grabbing Adam by the collar, she said in a voice not hers, "I'll make you one of us. We can be together. Forever."

As she leaned forward with intent to bite Adam, I leapt to push him out of the way, managing to succeed but Christy's teeth grazing my arm in the process. Irene, automatically running away, went into the electricity room and accidentally turned music onto the speakers.

So here we are, back where we began.

"*Someone's, gonna, come through for you,*" I crooned. I stopped, "The song is right. Someone came through for me, and I will for you."

"Know what I am now, and you can be too?" I smiled.

"...happy."

***The Man in the Purple Robe* — 3rd Place Winner** **By Jenna Smith**

"The nightmares are back again," I say choking on my words. "It's like I'm being haunted by my own mother's death." I pause; "Every night it's the same thing. I'm standing in that dingy hospital room screaming at her to wake up, but everytime she flatlines."

"Hope." Dr. Johnson says. "If you aren't doing what I'm asking, your PTSD is never going to get better. The journaling will help."

I sigh. "I know it will help. I just can't get past the thoughts. They torment me you know. Everytime I open that stupid notebook all of the emotions flood back in. I hate her for what she did."

"Please try," Dr. Johnson says as she motions for me to get up.

"I'll try, I promise." I say as I walk out of her office.

I've been coming to Dr. Johnson every Thursday since my mother took her own life a few months back. It's supposed to help me feel better, but honestly talking about it does the opposite for me. I'm more of the loner type. But Dr. Johnson says I need to write about my feelings to help me get past the trauma. And since my nightmares are worsening, I'm done excusing Dr. Johnson's help.

When I get home I go straight up to my room. Making writing my priority, I grab the violet notebook and a pen off of my desk. I haven't seen this in awhile I thought. I used to write often before my mother died. Writing was my hobby; quotes, poetry, song lyrics, my notebook was filled with that kind of stuff. I laugh to myself as I read the quote I'd written on the front cover, "Stay positive even when it feels like your life is falling apart". My mother used to say that; the truth of the statement slaps me. As I flip through the pages of my aged journal, an envelope with my name written on it falls onto my lap. It's my mother's handwriting. My heart races as I gingerly open the precious letter.

"Hope" it reads, "my sweet daughter. Words cannot describe how sorry I am for leaving you when you still need me. The love that I have for you is indescribable and because of that, it pains me to do what I am going to do. Please do not feel responsible for my actions. You have been nothing but a gift from God. You have always brought light to my darkest days and joy to my pain and for that I thank you. The depression that I face is a burden and it kills me everyday. This is my last option at finding peace. I feel empty. Please find the grace to forgive me. I love you."

And just like that, the tears begin to fall. Any emotions that I have held down are now rolling down my cheeks. For months I couldn't understand why she did it. Why didn't I know about her depression? She couldn't have talked to me? She couldn't have gotten help? I have so many questions that I'll never have the answers to. I haven't felt mad in months, but suddenly I am. I take the letter and my journal and throw them both. I can't stand what she did. I can't stand myself or being in this house any longer. "I need to get out of this house" I say choked with emotion. I grab a jacket and go outside. With my mascara still running, I sit on my porch hyperventilating from being submerged with emotion. I sob out of grief; every tear that falls stings. But eventually my franticness vanishes and I find the strength to get up and return to my room. As I clean up my mascara covered face I hear my phone go off. I grab it off of my vanity and read a text from a number I don't recognize,

"When you go through deep waters I will be with you, When you go through rivers of difficulty you will not drown. When you walk through the waters of oppression you will not burn, the flames will not consume you. -Isaiah 43:1". I laugh "I will be with you" I say in a mocking voice as I place my phone on my nightstand and turn my lamp off. With my eyes heavy from crying I lay on my bed attempting to sleep, terrified of the nightmare that will come once again.

Except, that nightmare never comes. In my dreams a man greets me with open arms. I can tell that he's royalty by looking at him. He is wearing a purple robe and a crown with beautiful jewels covering it.

"Hope." He says in a comforting voice that almost makes me cry "You are going to be okay. You can let her go."

Before I can speak I am pulled into an embrace and when I release I wake up. I don't think that I have ever felt that much peace in my life. But I couldn't understand why. I didn't know who that man was or why he was in my dream or why he was talking about my mother. All that I knew was I needed to know who he was. Then I remembered that text I had gotten before I fell asleep. No way I think.

Throughout the week I stick to writing. It was actually helping me feel better. I think that the real thing that was helping though was my dream; it gave me peace.

Ever since I had that dream it has given me unbelievable comfort. That dream would be the thing that was going to make me myself again.

Grade 10 Short Story

Orion's Belt — 1st Place Winner

By Sophia Smith

Slam.

The man shut the door behind him and the entire house shook.

Chasing after him was a seven year old boy, tears of anger and confusion spilling from his eyes.

Sitting at the kitchen table was a blank-faced woman, in shock, masking her heavy heart and her broken soul.

In her arms was a toddler, and inside of her, a child yet to be born.

That *slam* was the official sound of Orion's father abandoning his family.

It was the catalyst for all of the deleted texts, missed phone calls, and letters with no response.

It was the catalyst for begging for just one minute of the attention of his mother, single with three young boys, working two jobs but barely making enough to put food on the table.

It was the catalyst for bad report cards.

It was the catalyst for sitting alone, everywhere.

It was the catalyst for wordless cries for help.

It was the catalyst for waking up and crying because he knew had to get through another day in this world.

His entire life, he had been chasing after things. Everytime he attempted to get closer to something, it was never in reach. It was almost like a merry go round; just when he thought he was almost there, it just kept getting further away from him, until he realized he would never get close enough to have something he wants.

He stopped trying. He gave up on finding happiness, simply coming to the conclusion that it wasn't meant for him. He believed there must be a reason why his father left. Why his mother wasn't ever there for him. Why his grades were never good, why no one wanted to be his friend, why nothing made him smile. He became introverted and stopped opening up to others. He could never be himself with anyone in his social circle, always carrying the feeling that he was damaged or unwanted. His world was dark.

Until he met her.

She was the new kid and needed a partner. She spotted him alone, the only one *without* a partner, and approached him.

"I'm Grace. What's your name?"

"Orion." He muttered, staring down at his notebook.

“Orion? Like the constellation?”

He froze and looked up at her. Her hair was a fair shade of blonde flowing down her shoulders, her eyes framed by thick black lashes. As their eyes finally met, a soft smile graced her lips and he felt color creep under his skin.

“Yeah.” He finally nodded bashfully. “My dad was really into the stars, and stuff.”

“Orion.” She said it again. “I like it.”

He was scared the butterflies in his stomach were about to erupt out of his throat. He knew he shouldn’t get all red-faced over her, but he couldn’t help it. She was captivating. Her charisma helped him ease himself a little bit, but not too much. His guard was still all the way up, ready for danger.

...

Grace suddenly shut her textbook and slouched back in her chair.

“I’ve had enough.” She said, and looked at him. Her gold-spun hair hung messily over her shoulders, and her eyes were tired. “I feel like I’m going to fall asleep. Either that or I’m going to tear my hair out.”

“Please don’t do that,” he said, giving her a small smile.

“I know, I know,” she said, sighing.

They were at 24-hour coffee shop working on their project, it was getting late and they had been going at it almost nonstop. It was obvious that they both needed to ease off, not just to renew their energy but to lose some stress. They fell into another silence.

“Well,” he began, a bit uncertain. Grace looked up at him and he met her eyes. “It might be good to, you know, take a break.”

“Thank God.” She exhaled in relief. “We should go outside, I could use some fresh air.”

The moon was a low, waning crescent floating vaguely in the vast expanse, breaking through the heavy midnight darkness and granting a hazy light on the ground beneath it. Like a million small lanterns hanging in the distance, stars ornamented the pale cloudless indigo sky, and the glistening of an infinite world shone down on them. They laid down in the grass and gazed under the ocean of emptiness, silenced with a sense of overwhelming wonder.

“Look.” Grace pointed north towards three stars in a short, straight row. “It’s Orion’s Belt. It’s you.”

Butterflies rose in Orion’s chest. For the first time in a long time, he felt himself smile. A *real* smile that was genuine, one he couldn’t hold back.

“If you could go any place in the universe, where would you go?” He asked her.

Grace pondered for a minute. “Hmm...where are you going to be tomorrow?”

The inky blackness of the sky darkened as the night went on, and they layed there, just talking. There was a lot of laughter. A beautiful beam plastered on her face; the handsome curve of one corner of his mouth never left, only growing and growing throughout the evening.

As they were walking back inside, Grace’s foot caught on a rock in the pavement and sent her to the ground, bumping her head on the gravel.

“Oh my gosh, are you okay?” Orion rushed over to her and helped her up. She had a huge purple bruise in the center of her forehead, but she was laughing.

They headed back inside and got their things together. Orion drove her home.

“Are you sure you’re okay?” He asked her as she was getting out of the car. “You fell really hard, and you’re bruised pretty bad.”

She looked at him, smiling softly and said, “I feel better already.” Before he could respond, she shut the door.

It only got better from there.

Months flew by, and they never got tired of each other. In the loneliness of humans, she became someone that made him feel grounded. For the first time in his life he wasn’t hopelessly chasing after something he wanted; she fell for him, and gave him something to feel nice about and look forward to.

When she was gone, he obviously missed her, but it was different. It was more than just a sappy teenager missing his girlfriend in lust; it was like a homesickness for her, filled with wistfulness and nostalgia. Hearing her speak was like listening to the rain. Therapeutic and sedative, he could have had the worst day of his entire life, but the second that he heard her voice, his mood instantly sky rocketed. She was beautiful, creative, peaceful, and inspiring. It was literally like she obtained a characteristic of heaven or paradise, but still human enough to make mistakes. He had never given much thought to others’ hopes and dreams, but when she talked about hers, he wanted all of them to come true. He wanted her to be so happy.

But we don’t always get what we want.

He would never forget that phone call she had gotten from the hospital asking her to come in after she’d had her blood drawn.

He went with her and squeezed her hand as the words “acute myeloid leukemia” struck both of their hearts.

From that day on, it was roller coaster of chemotherapy, stem cell transplantations and several blue light ambulance trips to the hospital. Prior to her hair loss, she barely looked like anything was wrong with her. The first time he saw her without her golden locks, it was emotional for him, but he refused to let it change anything. They gave wigs a shot, but landed on scarves and goofy hats. They tried every day to talk openly with each other, have normal conversations, and act like everything was okay.

It was hard spending so much time apart, but they figured it out. When he wasn’t allowed to visit, they would talk on the phone for hours. He would send her flowers at least once a week with a note attached to it, saying something thoughtful or uplifting. If anything, the cancer brought them closer together, making them savor each day that they spent in each other’s presence.

She was so strong, and fighting so hard; but in the midst of all of it, he could see a part of her was dwindling away. The person she used to be was getting more and more distant, the color in her eyes slowly going flat.

One day in particular, Orion got a text in the middle of school from Grace’s mom that she was having a tough time and she thought he should come in. He picked up some flowers on the way there and rushed inside.

When he walked through the door, his heart broke. The purple rings under her eyes sat perched on her cheekbones, and her skin was such a sickly shade of pale that it was almost translucent. She was surrounded by her entire family, and tried to sit up to look at him, but sank back down in pain. He clenched his hand into a fist against his thigh and dug his fingers into his palm, walking towards her and placing the flowers next to her on the nightstand. His throat closed tight as he reached out to grab her hand. It was stone cold, and trembling. He took a deep breath as tears flowed down his face, like a river escaping a dam. She looked at the flowers, and then at him. Smiling softly, she said, "I feel better already."

Before he could respond, her smile slowly slipped away and the light faded out of her eyes. His world was dark again.

The Golden Arches — 2nd Place Winner
By Simon Lewis

Your mouth waters uncontrollably. All you want is a quarter pounder, from none other than your very favorite fabulous fast food establishment, McDonald's. Your phone died half an hour ago and your charger is broken, leaving you no choice but to desperately follow road signs. On a dirty napkin in front of you are the directions you hastily scratched out earlier. Turn left on Eighth Street. Curve left again after two miles. Right on Jefferson. Straight from there, until you take a sharp right onto Herverton Road.

Diligently, you watch the signs and turn as you should through the small town. As difficult as the signs are to see in both the dusky light and blanketing fog, you still are positive you follow them correctly. Your ravenous hunger leaves no time for mistakes. With the speed you are driving, unlawful errors are likely, but you pay them no heed as they are insignificant in achieving your goal. You swerve around the last corner twenty-five miles-per-hour above the speed limit. Drool runs down your faces and flies around you, and you can feel your sweat making your shirt stick to you. Eyes watering, you peer through the windshield, desperate to spot the emergence of the golden arches from the fog.

But ahead, all that is visible through the fog is a face. Forty feet in the air, freckles, and two red braids. A wide smile stretches between the braids, and above it lie the haunting eyes, devilishly staring down in feigned joy that unmistakably hides murder underneath. The fog seems to emit from her nose as she stares at you, and in a seizing, horrifying moment, you suddenly know there is no escape. You cannot breathe – the air simply is not moving. You are frozen in your car. Your foot is locked on the accelerator, and you are moving forward at a rapidly escalating speed. Your eyes are locked with hers. Your heart does not beat. You fly at her now, racing well above a hundred miles per hour. Your drool has dried suddenly, and you are disgusted to the point at which you know you cannot eat. You feel the bile rising in your throat – it is the only part of you that you believe is moving. Simultaneously your stomach roars in anger because it suddenly knows that it will experience no satisfaction, for the road signs have not led you to a horizon of golden arches, but to a horizon with a face. This is no McDonald's. This is something much worse, unimaginable even: a Wendy's.

Still flying, eyes continuously locked, you scream in fury at the face. A bonfire of determination erupts inside of you, and you grip the wheel with fists of steel, staring upwards. You will not lose the staring contest. She glares down, smiling wickedly. She thinks she can win, but you know there is no victory in store for her. Shifting your wheel slightly, you direct the car towards the base of the sign she rests upon, and you fly faster than ever. Matching your own roar, the car races forward. Eyes locked and watering, you never leave her gaze. Then suddenly, collision. A huge crash. Your car is totaled, but it matters little. The base of the sign snaps and through the very top of your windshield you see the eyes flicker out. Victory is yours.

That is the last thing you see, except for light. You feel yourself floating upwards, leaving your body. Below, through the fog, you see that Wendy's face lies in destruction, with your body strewn on top. People race out of the restaurant to weep over her obliteration, and you feel satisfaction flow through your blood. Slowly you let yourself rise, comfortable in the knowledge that she has fallen and will forever lay in wreckage, thanks to your brave sacrifice. You will be a martyr for all of those who live each day for the quarter pounders. You turn upwards, and see castles in the sky – and at the gates are golden arches. You happily float upwards towards the gates, and a smile – wait. Golden arches. Suddenly your throat seizes up, because your work on Earth is not yet done. The golden arches of the afterlife are not the ones for you. You whip around mid-air and reach downwards. Yet still, you float up. “Ragghhh!!!!” you scream, and you thrash downwards. Still you seem to be pulled higher by some invisible force. You reach down with all of your will, and pull yourself towards Earth. “I will liveeee” you bellow, and suddenly all is still in the sky: you lay suspended in midair, reaching downwards. Tears begin to stream from your eyes, and your stomach groans in agony. With all of your being, you decide that the quarter pounder will be yours. That final decisive declaration is just enough, and you are back on Earth.

You stand in your body, and watch people around you scream in shock. They back up, sure that you were just dead, given the broken bones and glass shards protruding from your body. Paying these injuries no heed, you look around. Turning left and right, you see . . . no golden arches. There is no McDonald's in miles. You don't know how you are aware, yet you simply are. You feel death pulling at you once more – the eternal sleep. No. NO. The golden arches must be yours. Your quarter pounder. The only reason you live is for the arches. Your existence is for the arches. Yet still, you feel the pull of death. The knowledge that you don't have long to live pours over you, and you begin to fall into the endless sleep. There will be no return this time . . . but then you feel yourself say no. Your stomach, your mouth, your brain, your heart, every part of your being says no. No. NO. NO.

Suddenly, the world around you begins to tear. It rips, and the people dissolve. The grass, the broken face, the store – they all become distorted, and melt into the fog. The sound surrounding you is both a deafening torrent and silent vacuum. Fog begins to swirl around you, gaining speed. You have ripped apart the very reality that you live in, and suddenly you know everything about the universe. All of the answers are yours. Light, darkness, matter, space, and time. All for your manipulation. The swirling fog is yours to shape however you would like. You have destroyed reality, and it is now yours to create however you would like. You are the new creator and ruler. The Big Bang era is over, and now reality will exist as yours.

There is no question of what to do. Telepathically, you seize control of the fog, and it begins to glow. It forms two arches that each suddenly shine brightly. Golden light radiates throughout reality, and a familiar jingle can be heard in the rushing winds. You move the arches towards one another, and suddenly they meet. A blinding light erupts from the fusion, and all of the fog, all of the universe, all of reality melts. Reality ceases to exist, and then suddenly, it does.

You breathe in, and judging from the taste of the air you realize that you are home. Seated at a table in a classic McDonald's restaurant, you look around you and see that the store is empty, save for one figure. In front of you stands Ronald himself. Tears begin to stream down your face as you sit before your god. He hands you a steaming quarter pounder, which you delicately accept and set down on the table in awe. Then, he hands you your favorite side of extra-large fries. Your drink is next, and then from his pocket he pulls a Ronald McDonald action figure. The last one that you sought for your collection but never received from happy meals in your childhood. You spent years trying to find it, and here it is, given to you. Tears cascade down your cheeks, and you are eternally moved. You fall onto your knees and kiss his feet, with your tears seeming to wash them. "Stand," he says quietly. You rise, action figure in hand, unsure of how to hold yourself in front of such a man, such a god. Instinct guides you. "I defeated her" you breathe quietly, "I died for you." "I know," he breathes back, just as quietly. "I lived for you" you state, and then, "I destroyed and recreated reality... for you." "I know" he whispers back. A single tear slides down his cheek. An additional tear slides down yours. You gaze into each other's eyes, but this unwillingness to blink comes from a very different fire inside of you than the one that burned for Wendy's.

After what seems like an eternity, you blink together, and then you slowly sit down. Savoring the flavors, you slowly consume the quarter pounder, your fries, and drink. The meal drags from minutes to what feels like hours, days, weeks, or even years. Regardless of the time taken, you are comfortable in the knowledge that your food will remain indefinitely well-preserved, because, after all, this is McDonald's. At the end of the meal, you feel death calling you again, and you sense yourself beginning to fade from existence. You look at Ronald, and he looks back. Then, abruptly, he removes his wig (it's not hair!?), and places it upon your head. He begins to fade from existence in your stead, but not before the make-up fades off of his face. It reappears on yours, and once more, you feel a tear. You are Ronald McDonald. He is dying for you. "Thank-you" you whisper as he disappears. He smiles in return, then is gone.

***River* — 3rd Place Winner**
By Lanie Gladding

The wind brushed my skin. The cold metal of the terrace seat gave me chills as I pulled my jacket on a bit more. My hair whipped around me, obstructing my vision over the river. I sat, patiently, waiting for life to give me a sign as to where to go next. I couldn't tell you why I was in Italy, I didn't know for myself, I just knew I was lost, and I'm perfectly content with it.

The faint sound of nearby cars teased in the background. Smooth, slow jazz danced from my speakers, drifting into its melody, my worries seemed to dissipate. I didn't know what job to have or

who to associate with or where to live, so I lived nowhere, worked online, and never had a true set of friends. And I was fine with it. I did although, have a best friend. I gazed over the river, the crystal waters reminding me of this best friend. Clear, calm, and persistent. The lamps who bordered the river, flickered a bit but never failed to reflect so brilliantly off the river. The stars, shown in this river, stars that watched over me, always there even when we can't see them, reflected in this river, this river was loyal. Funny to call a river loyal I suppose, although I didn't mind too much, because this river was more than a river to me. I looked around the beautiful city, and wondered, "How I end up here?" How was I blessed in such a way to have eyes to witness this beauty? Or hands to touch? How'd I, a sinner saved by grace, get so fortunate? I knew I didn't deserve the amazing sight of the river, and yet here I sit.

A leaf blew off a cherry tree, and into this river. It drifted deep until resting on the bottom. The contents of the river, no matter how many pedals it held, never effected its brilliance. But only made me more fascinated by the river. Ripples peaked in the river as a slight gust blew, the river seemed angry with its ripples one after one, never the less, the river returned to its state of peace, diligent and wise. The more I sat and observed this river, the more it reminded me of my best friend. A best friend, committed to a cause and confidently diligent, as the river is. I glanced up, finding the night sky, freckled with stars. It's interesting because they're so far away, but so bright, they're so dazzling, so breathtaking, like the river.

I stood up, closed my eyes and took it all in. In awe of the sights I'm surrounded by. In awe of the river. The river so much as him. I opened my eyes, discovering a smile on my face. Funny thing how everything in life ties together.

Making my way to the terrace stairs, I slipped my hand over the biting cold metal of the railing and hesitantly started to descend. One foot after the other I left the sight of the river and stars behind me and off to whatever else life had for me. Despite my grip on the rail, I tripped, I caught my foot on the stair, and fell over the rail. As gravity over took me, I expected to smack the ground with aggression. But instead, I found myself saved by the arms of my best friend.

Grade 11 Short Story

***Flashbacks to Another Time* — 1st Place Winner**

By Ted Hirsch

Have you ever seen someone that gave you a sense of deja vu, but you didn't quite recognize where the person was from? Where it was almost as if something was important about the person... but it was something that you just couldn't quite remember?

Little did I know what these blips of familiarity were for me when they started. You see, my story begins back a few months ago when we were still agonizing over high school. Unlucky for me at the time, I was about to experience every high schooler's worst nightmare. I was about to be assigned a lengthy project.

“Finn... Finn Huxley... wake up.” I peeked my head up from my fortress of solitude, with walls made up of a bunch of old foreign people fighting or something... “Finn, you can’t be doing that anymore. You’re only hurting your own grade at this point.” said my history teacher Mrs. Knox, continuing on with her daily rant. “As you all know, this upcoming week is founder’s day for the town, so all of you are going to write a brief history of an important figure or event of our town. Who it is or what it is, is up to you.”

I sighed, adding the requirements to a sheet of notebook paper. Not being the most popular kid, my days were pretty lame, mostly pertaining to the same routine...wake up, go to school, eat lunch, come home, do school work, sleep; every day, for 180 days of my life each year. So, the rest of the day came and went according to schedule, until I started research on a topic to just get the project over with.

I opened my laptop and scrolled down a timeline of the town’s events on the county website until I came across a picture that stuck out. The image in question was of a large white mansion from the 1920s, glimmering with gold accents only made shinier by the flames erupting out of the windows. The heading above it read, “*Devastating Fire Leaves 13 Attendees Dead Including the Mayor.*” The headline seemed to spark some weird memories... “I... I know this place...” I thought to myself, clicking the link to further investigate. Before the page could load, my mind went blank, I slowly felt numb, and my vision went hazy.

“Oliver... OLIVER, get up, we’re here!” said a strange woman next to me as my vision faded back into what looked to be reality. I was so startled to respond, but my lips began to move on their own accord and my body began to lazily roll out of the carriage. “Oh, I’m on my way Clementine...” I felt trapped inside a body that wasn’t my own, forced to be a spectator to someone else’s life. I was so dazed and filled with unrivaled anxiousness that I didn’t recognize my surroundings immediately, until a little patch of gold shone next to me as I was dragged into the halls, the doors closing around me.

Suddenly I was back in my own body, traumatized but alive. I breathed a sigh of relief as I opened the computer again, the image of the building still on it. “What in the world.” I muttered under my breath in a slightly more offensive way. “Did... did I just time travel? Was that the past?” I wondered as I tried to recall the events. “Oliver and Clementine... Oliver and Clementine..” I repeated over and over in my head as I scanned the page. It turned out that the whole event was a big mystery that had yet to be solved and so their names were missing from the page. Reacting quickly, I frantically tried to go over other places to find information in my head. “Mom and Dad...no, they would think something is wrong with me... the Library?” The library had to be it. Lucky for me, I lived only a block down the street from it.

I quickly formulated the best plan of action to get out of the house undetected. I would simply walk out the front door. You see, my mother wasn’t home yet and my dad was busy working on the back lawn, so it was an easy move. Soon I was jogging down the street and then at the doors of my next hint. A cool breeze flew past me emitting the ever so wonderful slight smell of musty old paper. The place looked abandoned, with the few people that were inside gathered around the computers that had just been installed. Carefully, I approached the front desk and rang the bell. “Hello?” My voice rang out shattering the silence left after the scream of the bell. Or, at least it felt that way. Suddenly, a person

appeared from the room behind the desk, carrying a cup of coffee and a tiny book. “You rang the bell?” She said to me “yes...” I mumbled.

“No need to speak so softly, now, what are you looking for?” she said in a sort of robotic monotone. “Ummm, do you have anything on an Oscar and Clementine duo, or something about the mansion fire in the 1920s?” I responded, watching her type as fast as I spoke and rolling around to check files. She fluttered through a row of folders until she found the one she was looking for, and in the same motion a crane makes, dropped the folder in front of me before walking back to the break room. “I swear, the rumor about her being a robot must be true...” I said to myself as I picked up the file and brought it to an empty seat.

Carefully opening it, I saw the image of someone staring back at me, with a large handlebar mustache, and an odd grin on his face. I locked up again and began to fade out.

I was staring into a mirror, in what looked to be the mansion, as if I was secretly trying to locate something. My face was forced into a slight grin as Oscar saw his target. I pulled a piece of parchment from my jacket and saw a picture of a man who resembled someone not too far away. The notes below it read “*Alleged arsonist and murderer, has connections to over 21 incidents, is he planning something today?*” My heart sank... “This has to be the day of that fire.” I thought as Oscar moved us towards the man.

“Hello, I’m Oscar Townswald. I must ask sir, have you seen anyone around acting suspicious? I fear someone might be out to ruin your party for I am a detective .” “Classy” I thought after Oscar had directly confronted this man and expressed his mission. “Why no... I Harold Sycamore haven’t seen anyone acting as such, now if you’ll excuse me...” he paused looking into the shared face of Oscar and I. “Wait...” the man took off, throwing the drink he had onto my face and knocked me out of the memory.

I hopped up from my chair with a start, knocking over my chair in the process. I could suddenly feel the eyes of everyone in the room upon me, and so I did what I like to think anyone would do... casually give everyone a thumbs up while sprinting as fast as they could out of the building.

My body knew where to take me as I processed the information I had gathered in my head. I rounded corner after corner, wondering what awaited my when I found the next marker. After about 10 minutes of running, I saw it, the statue in the town plaza.

This was it, this was Harold Sycamore; but here he was shown as a kind and generous mayor... I was suddenly hit with a wave of panic. “How.. how am I going to convince people that this is the face of a cold-blooded murderer and not a kind mayor...?” I looked again at the statue’s face, this time freezing and blacking out in public.

Suddenly we were on the roof, the sounds of a crackling fire beneath me. I was staring into Harold’s eyes with my face bent in rage. “Couldn’t save them all this time, could you Oscar? You thought you could really make everyone believe that I, their beloved mayor, would kill for fun?” He said taunting me from across the way “This ends here Harold, no more deceptions, no more tricks to save you. All will be found out in time. Then they’ll know you for what you truly were!” Oscar said boldly as the flames began to consume the roof around them. “Clementine got out, she’ll know what to do.” Oscar

whispered under his breath, charging straight at Harold. The two began to struggle as the flames hissed and crackled around them, then out of nowhere, the roof collapsed beneath them.

I quickly pulled myself up as bystanders tried to see if I was ok. I tried waving them off as I swung open the folder and found an interesting picture. It was of Oscar and Clementine, sitting in the very park where I was, right behind where the statue now stood. Stumbling over to the location, I searched in the only place I knew something could be hidden, the ground. Everyone looked at me confused and worried as I dug deeper and deeper, until I hit something. It was a tiny box, with an elegant pattern on the outside. I pulled it out and carefully opened it all the while, people behind me were stunned. In it, was a tiny photo and some papers of the true Harold, some of his diary, and all of it signed by the Townswald Detective agency.

It took a few days, but the current mayor had the statue removed and the articles on the truth behind Harold published at the same time. People were surprised to find that some random kid digging in the park found the evidence blowing the case wide open, and questioned how I knew where it was. Little did they know of the strange circumstances surrounding it and the series of events that took place that day.

Friends— 2nd Place Winner **By Daniel Cruz**

Darkness began falling on the city as the tiny, sparkling lights began filling the sky. The music of the chirping from the crickets commenced, and a bark of a dog joined in with the tune. One house, hiding in the darkness, showed glimmering light coming from one of its windows. The light came beneath the blankets held up by a broom stick on a comforting bed. Two silhouettes were seen through the white blankets as one of them held a flashlight.

“Then he started slowly creeping towards the man,” the one shadow whispered eerily, “and . . . ATE him!”

“*Ahhh*” screamed the other shadow in a high-pitch, yet so soft that they did not wake up the mother.

“I think that was your scariest one yet,” the second shadow replied as it held a blanket around its head.

“Haha yeah, you scream like a little girl,” the first responded. The second gave a light punch to the other’s shoulder.

“Shut up, haha,” then the two silhouettes let the music of the chirping, from outside, take over the silence. The two figures sat there, enjoying their alone time together.

“Hey . . . we been friends for a long time,” the first shadow finally said to interrupt the rhythm of the chirping, “but do you think there will be a day when we’ll never see each other again?” The second shadow slightly lifted his head, confused on why his friend would ever think something like that.

“What? Of course not! You’re my best, best friend in the whole universe,” the second responded.

“You mean it?”

“You bet! And even if we don’t see each other for a while, we’ll always remember each other.” The second sticks out his pinky, “deal?” The first smiled and wrapped his pinky around the other’s pinky.

“Deal,” just then the door creaked open as the mother’s head popped through the crack of the door.

“Thomas,” the mother whispered in a soothing, lovely voice, “are you talking to yourself again at the middle of the night?”

“No mom, I made a promise to Eddwin to never ever ever leave him. . . ever,” The mother looked at the tent his son had made and only sees one silhouette being shown through the blankets.

“Oooh I see, well tell *Eddwin* to go to sleep too,”

“Ok mom, goodnight.”

“Goodnight sweetie,” she said as she slowly closed the door.

Thomas turned off his flashlight, placed it under his pillow, and laid his head on his soft, fluffy pillow.

“Goodnight, Eddwin,” he yawned.

“Goodnight, Thomas,” the shadow said as the chirping takes over the silence once again.

Eddwin looked up into the starrng night, with sparkling stars, and the moon shining down to the ground. He stuck his pinky up towards the sky; still heartbroken.

“Still hoping to see that boy again, eh?” a cowboy said with a deep, tough voice. He had on a hat and his facial hair looked as if he hadn’t shaved in years. His outfit was leather with a faded brown, red bandana around his neck, jeans with ripped holes, leather boots, and a badge with faded letters: *Number one friend*. Chugging from a brown, glass bottle he continued, “Happens to all of us. You have a good time with them, but get broken once they forget about ye.”

“I . . . just don’t understand why I am here. I don’t belong here,” Eddwin responded to his comment as he continued to look towards the sky.

“Heh, herd that expression many times before. You’re never gonna see that kid ever.”

“No!” Eddwin interrupted quickly after his sentence and look at him, “Thomas will remember me. He made a promise that we would always be friends.”

The cowboy scoffed, “Well that boy ain’t good at keepin’ promises,” he adjusted his hat on his head to cover his eyes, “You’re waiting for something that is never gonna happen. You can have all the wishes in this universe and you’ll still have no chance of seeing that Thomas. Just give up about hopin.”

“Shut up! You don’t know what you’re talking about!” Eddwin barked back at him.

“No *you* don’t know what you’re talkin about, boy.”

“Shut up, shut up, shut up!” Eddwin yelled as he covered his ears.

“Hey. . . can you guys be a little quieter, please?” a distant weak, stuttering voice came from the trees. It was an elephant, shaking uncontrollable, with his ears flopped down on the side of his head. “I . . . I’m . . . trying to sleep. . . here.”

“Ahh,” the cowboy groaned while taking another sip of his bottle, “I’ma get out of here, you keep dreamin kiddo,” He walked toward the river with a forced emotionless face, as the hat cast dimness over his eyes. The darkness slowly ate up the cowboy as he walked away, while the elephant spun in place and laid down on the cold ground. He covered his eyes with his floppy ears, not wanting to be disturbed.

“I don’t get why people think so negatively. We just need to believe in our friends,” Eddwin said to himself.

The elephant lifted his right ear to reveal his dainty eyes and replied. “It’s . . . hard to believe. . . when you lose something. . . that. . .that you thought you would never lose.”

“I know it’s hard, but we simply can’t give up so easily”

“Well. . . it’s hard to do anything without. . .” a small droplet escaped from the elephant’s eyes, “without. . . Lily.” Eddwin’s facial expression dropped to an apologetic one.

“I’m sorry to mention about your loved one.” Eddwin said sincerely.

“It’s okay. . . I always think about Lily. She was a sweet, little girl who gave the best hugs and had a graceful smile. Whenever she was feeling down, we would lay on the ground together and talk all night about positive things only. She first imagined me after she watched a movie about a circus elephant who learned how to fly. I didn’t learn how to fly, but in my dreams, I would soar through the clouds with her on my back. We would go to wherever the wind would have taken us.”

Eddwin was touched when he heard his story, fighting back the emotional tears that tried to penetrate through his eyes. He leaned in closer to comfort the elephant and said.

“It may seem as if we lost everything, but we still have a little, yet powerful item. Faith. It won’t make things easy, but it will make things possible. What defines a strong person is not one who never shows grief; it’s someone who can handle the pain through the end. The pain will end. I promise. If I ever go back to our home world, then I would make it my number one goal to find your friend.” Eddwin lifts his hand and sticks out his pinky. The elephant gave a shy smile and wrapped his trunk around Eddwin’s pinky.

“Thank you,” the elephant whispered with a bit of amusement.

The moon continues to shine brightly down on to the two of them. The soothing water flows down the river, as the brilliant stars continue to show off their luminous light.

“Hehe, that’s funny Sandy,” a little girl giggles. While sitting at the dinner table, the father is at the sink washing the dirty dishes. The sink water rushing down the drain gave an amusing sound. The father then asks, with curiosity,

“Hey Gracie, who are you talking to?”

“Oh, it’s my new imaginary best friend, Sandy,” Gracie responds with a voice of glee. Gracie’s two ponytails run down each cheek with the delightful smile. The sight of her teeth always made the father smile.

“Ah so you have an imaginary friend?” the father chuckles. “I remember being your age and having an imaginary friend myself.”

“What was his name?”

“Uhm. . . let’s see. . . his name was. . .” he gave a solid thought on it and finally yelled, “Eddwin! Yeah, his name was Eddwin. We used to spend long nights together, telling scary stories and talking about life.”

“What happened to Eddwin?” Gracie curiously asked.

Suddenly, a lost piece had been brought back to the father once those words were said. The father glanced at the doorway and saw a figure standing there. The world around him moved in slow-motion. The plate, once in his hand, contacted the floor and shattered to a million pieces. His eyes widen and stood there motionless. He could not find the words to describe how he was feeling. A droplet of tears fell down to the ground.

“Hey Thomas. We have lots of catching up to do.”

Grade 12 Short Story

O — 1st Place Winner

By Jake Rider

It had been a couple hundred years since I had a human. That wasn’t a complaint, more a statement on the fact that most vampires don’t need to eat humans to survive, they simply either don’t know anything else or, worse, do it out of malice or spite. I’ve been living in a Victorian townhouse which is the only house like it on the block. The rest of the houses are cookie cutter houses with cookie cutter families standing on their cookie cutter lawns laughing and smiling without a care in the world. My relationship with them was limited, glancing in windows as they sat in the living room, the father reading and smoking his pipe, a perplexed look on his face. The mother playing with the children. It looked like an advertisement for averageness. They bored me.

Nobody really bothered my house, other than the occasional teenager, hellbent on breaking the mold only to be conforming to another. Many a night, I had come home from my evening walks to find my front door halfway off its hinges and a couple canoodling in my living room or shooting up heroin in the kitchen. This didn’t bother me any, and besides the reactions of the children were quite amusing at times. A vampire’s sense of smell is incredibly keen. I would simply pick them up by the collar like lost kittens and bring them to the house that smells like them. I would ring the doorbell and vanish when someone came to the door. Then, from afar, I would transfer my knowledge of the recent events to the one who opens the door, if they are responsible enough. Then the cookie cutter parents usually grabbed the remolded children and dragged them in.

Dinner most every night consisted of rats and the occasional stray cat. About once a month I indulged myself with a trip to the countryside for a pig. I always considered it my contribution to the little cul-de-sac to keep it free of these pests. Keeping all the nuisances out of their way so they could go on living. To be honest, other than meals and the times I was awake, nothing much had changed from when

I turned. I would still attend community meetings occasionally. About once a generation. Just to say that I lived in that house, that it was paid for, that my “dues” would be paid, and the house would be upkeep. Nobody really bothered me about my “longevity” either. Maybe out of fear, maybe they learned from their kids' example. Or maybe my group hypnosis worked. Who knows?

It was a chilly night in December when I heard a knock on my door. I was frankly surprised; as the sun had gone down hours ago. I opened the door a crack. A small child with cherry red cheeks. He was tightly bundled in an airy red parka, a little red scarf and a hat. All in all, he looked like a tiny blood cell. And there he stood, on the porch staring at me rather timidly and holding a plate of something that looked like sausage but smelled divine, even to someone such as me. “Who are you?” I said in a hushed voice attempting to intimidate the little boy into running, and hopefully dropping the plate in his fear. “I’m Stefan” he said as he tucked his face further into the scarf and shivered. “What did you bring me?” I whispered again. “Mommy made some pudding, so I thought you might like some. You seem quite lonely. I never see you sitting outside or reading.” he replied, seemingly without fear. That little boy’s words perplexed me. Not because they were perplexing on their own but because they made me self-conscious. For the first time in quite a while, I thought about what I had chosen to be. “I’m quite fine by myself and I don’t take any gifts. What is that made from anyways?” I managed to stammer out before I realized the little boy was freezing out there. “Forgive me, young Stefan. Please come in.” I opened the door fully. I was, rather embarrassingly, still in long black sleep pants and a robe. All I was missing was the cup of coffee and I could pass as anyone else on the street in the morning time. “Ahh, forgive me again. I’m going to go change, but first...”

I ushered him into my study, making sure to put anything valuable, and potentially scarring, out of sight and out of reach. I hurried as fast as my body would let me as I put on my clothes to go out; a white collared shirt, black pants and a black belt. I threw a couple logs on the fire and heated up the small room. I sat down in a large leather chair adjacent to him. “So why again did you decide to stand on a stranger's porch, alone, with a plate of food?” “Because you looked lonely, so I brought you some food.” “Well, I will say, that is surprising. Now go home and be more careful next time. Some people on this street are not so savory.” “Okay. Can you walk me home?” “S-sure” I stammered out. I bundled him back up in his winter coat and scarf and began walking. He reached his warm little hand out and took mine. Soon we were at his house. I rang the doorbell and vanished.

Nobody came. “Mister,” he said, “Mommy is out with friends.” I reappeared behind him. “Isn't the door unlocked?” “No, she left me outside” My god! Really? “Well, I suppose you can stay at m-” He grabbed my hand and bolted back down the street towards my house. Later that evening, I ran to the store and got some food for him. We sat at either end of a table in the great hall, surrounded by pictures of my ancestors. Occasionally he would point at one and ask about them. One brief history later, he would exclaim “Cooooool!” and go back to his beef stew. I partook of the wonderful treat he had brought. It was blood pudding, and it tasted divine.

I ended up bringing him home later that evening, asleep in my arms. I left him in the care of that woman, against my better judgement and went home. The next day, a similar scene played out. He brought me food, we ate together, he went home. Many years passed like this, and I got to watch him grow up. He was 17 at this meal. We sat across from each other as we had so many times before. He was eating rather

quietly. I was reading over paperwork for adoption. His mother had died recently, overdosed on heroin. I was filling out the forms when he piped up, "What did you think of my mother." "I thought she could have been there more but it's not like I mind, considering I basically raised you." He stood up rather abruptly. "I'm going for a ride." He stormed out of the house. I should have stopped him, but I let him go. He needed to blow off some steam, and besides, I can't see the future.

Soon a smell hit my nostrils, quite familiar to me. The smell of blood. His blood. I ran to the center of the street to find two cars smashed into each other. I looked at both drivers. One was beyond recognition and the other, who I realized to be my son, had his chest caved in. I began to try and pry him out but couldn't for fear of injuring him further. I ran back to the house and dialed the police. They were there in moments. I rode in the ambulance, making sure he was alive as they did urgent tests. We soon arrived at the hospital. Many shouts and rushing bodies later, he was behind closed doors as I sat in a waiting room for the news.

Soon a man in a white lab coat came out. "Sir, does this child have any close relatives." "No," I commented, "His mother died recently, and I was in the process of filling out adoption forms." "Damn," he muttered under his breath, "we need a blood transfusion quick." "We're the same blood type" I blurted out. "Just... put a curtain around me" "Sure, but we gotta hurry." He led me back to a room, laid me down on a table and rubbed something on my arm. "This might be a little uncomfortable Mr..." "Mr. Tepes...God!" At that point, he had shoved a needle in my arm. "You know", he said, "I always liked folks like you. You're so pale, it's easy to see the vein. Alright, I'm going to leave you here and hook up Stefan over there." He shut the curtain. I watched as my hands shriveled and I dried up. I began to pass out. My hair fell out. Finally, on the other side of the curtain, I heard the doctor. "We're good over here," He began to open the curtain, but I had already disconnected that horrible device in my arm and left the room in search of sustenance. "Holy mother of macaroni and cheese," I heard him say. He went back to check on Stefan, making sure that his vitals were still okay. I sped through the hospital and found myself in a walk-in fridge. I had eyes for the bags of blood in the cooler alone. That night was the first time I had had human blood in centuries.

One week later we sat across from each other, father and son. "Umm, dad?" he inquired. "Hm?" I looked up from my soup, which was just pigs' blood. I still hadn't regained full health, but I was much better than the first few nights. "I, uhh, I have something to show you." "Alrighty then, go ahead." I put down my spoon and sat forward attentively. He stood up and jumped. And landed back on the ceiling. I pushed back my hair and joined him up there. We shared a laugh and an embrace. "Can you still go out during the daylight?" I inquired. "Yeah, but I'm just getting the hang of this stuff, so sometimes I break things," he confessed. "Well don't worry" I said, "You've got a good teacher to help you out, so you'll be fine."

Happy Holidays — 2nd Place Winner
By Zoe Michelle Bradshaw

The house was cold. It didn't really matter; she was leaving in about half an hour anyway. She could make do with a sweater until then. There was no point in getting things toasty just before she headed out. The cat? He would be fine. He had fur. And if the dryer finished when she thought it was going to, then she'd have fresh, warm towels for him to lay in while she was gone.

"I should figure something else out for him. This is probably going to take a while," she said to no one in particular. Maybe she could put another blanket in his bed? Or not. He didn't really use it. Normally he just shared with her, taking up more than half the bed, tossing and turning, and occasionally scratching her in his sleep. At least one of them was comfortable.

Or...she could just go get takeout instead of meeting everyone. Fries sounded good. Mittens liked chicken nuggets. She could get the food, come home, and work on that English paper. It was due in a few days and she still needed to proofread it. That sounded better. She could wear sweatpants to do that.

It wasn't that she didn't love her family, or that she had something against holiday parties. It was just...what had she even done this year? She was a reasonably good student, but she wasn't anything remarkable. She had a job and a few hobbies, but there was nothing she was especially stellar at. To be honest, the only remarkable thing about her was how long she could go without sleep. Yay for being the least interesting person in the room.

It was one thing to be that way with the people she saw all the time - they didn't care, otherwise they wouldn't stick around - but she only saw these particular relatives once a year, and here she was again: a hot mess brimming with mediocrity.

She checked the mirror for the third or fourth time. Sweater, nice jeans, earrings, nothing special. Minimal makeup, nothing too cartoonish. Her hair was behaving for a change. That was special.

The earrings were crooked. Dang it. She reached to fix them, fumbled around in her makeup bag for some lipstick. Just because she was a hot mess didn't mean she needed to look like one.

And now the bag was on the floor. Great. She dropped to her knees to pick everything up, hoping nothing was spilled or cracked. Especially mascara. That stuck to anything it touched and she really didn't have time to clean it up. Mittens would help with that, but then he'd get sick and she didn't think she could afford the vet bills.

Her makeup was fine; the point on an eyeliner was broken, but she could just sharpen it when she got the chance. Everything would be fine. All she had to do was make it through tonight, and she wouldn't have to worry about any of this for another year.

She was young. She had time to turn things around by next year. All she had to do was get through school. Things would get better. Honestly, if her roommate, Ally, was here, she would be hearing all about how she was doing amazing just the way she was. Ally would say that she didn't need all those New Year's resolutions that she probably wouldn't keep anyway.

Then again, Ally had never met her family. Was her lipstick smudged? Darn it. She'd spent half an hour trying to get her makeup right and she'd never quite figured out how to fix this. Actually, it wasn't super noticeable. Whatever. It would be fine.

There was the dryer. She moved the towels to a chair for the cat and emptied the lint trap. It wasn't super urgent, but if she didn't do it now, she'd probably forget later. A fire was the last thing she needed. Even if it was an accident, she and Ally couldn't get kicked out of campus housing. Speaking of fires, was the stove off? Ally kept forgetting to do that after she finished cooking and sometimes, they didn't realize it for hours.

Okay, it was off. One less thing to worry about. Then she glanced at the thermostat. The heat was turned down, which was good. She didn't want it on when she wasn't there; it was too much money for a fire hazard. This apartment was too darn flammable. It was fine. Nothing that bad was going to happen tonight.

She just needed to put her keys in her purse and find her other shoe.

Where was her other shoe?

She'd put them away together. It was December, so she wasn't wearing anything small enough that the cat could steal it easily. If Mittens had tried to drag it somewhere, she would have seen it. And now she'd tripped over a ball he'd pushed out. Stupid cat. Why did he have to do stuff like that all the time? She was a good cat mom - and there was her shoe. Okay. This was better. She stepped into her shoes, grabbed a jacket, and set the door to lock behind her.

The cat was on the bed. The stove was off. The heat was turned back. Everything was locked. Her keys were in her purse. Her shoes matched. She swallowed hard and stepped out the front door.

She could do this.

Maybe.

Appreciation and Acknowledgements:

- ❖ The committee would like to thank all **the students** who submitted entries to Young Authors this season. All of you should be very proud of your endeavors. It was very difficult selecting the best from many outstanding poems and stories. If you did not place this year, please continue to pursue your passion for writing and submit another entry next year!
- ❖ A “shout out” to all **the teachers** who encouraged, inspired, (possibly cajoled?) your students to submit their work to the Young Authors’ Contest. We want to thank each of you for all you do every day to light a fire for literacy! We could not have this event without all your contributions!
- ❖ Thank you to our guest speaker, children’s author **Jennifer Keats Curtis**. Curtis has penned numerous stories about animals, including Children’s Choice Book Award Winner **Kali’s Story: An Orphaned Polar Bear Rescue** and International Literary Association Children’s Choice Reading List Award winner **Moonlight Crab Count**. Several of her books have been chosen as *NSTA/CBC Outstanding Science Trade Books of the Year*, including the nonfiction **Maggie: Alaska’s Last Elephant** and two realistic fictions co-authored with scientists: **After A While Crocodile: Alexa’s Diary** and **Moonlight Crab Count**. Her latest realistic fiction, **Baby Bear’s Adoption**, is based on the work of biologists who have figured out how to place orphaned baby bears with an adoptive bear mom. The long-time writer’s 23rd book, the nonfiction **River Rescue**, debuts this spring. She is currently writing about aquatic benthic macroinvertebrates (just water bugs!) with scientists from The Stroud Research Center. For more information about Jennifer, visit her website at www.jenniferkeatscurtis.com, check out her Twitter feed and Green Author Facebook page, and email her at jenniferkcurtis@verizon.net.
- ❖ Thank you to **Salisbury University and the staff of Dining and Event Services** for providing the reception for the Young Authors’ Contest!
- ❖ We want to acknowledge the support of **Dr. Patricia Dean** of the **Teacher Education Program in the Seidel School of Professional Development** for making this event possible.
- ❖ Thank you to the **Eastern Literacy Association Executive Board and members** for supporting the mission of our organization to promote literacy and support educators in Wicomico, Worcester, and Somerset counties of Maryland’s Eastern Shore. The Eastern Shore Literacy Association is affiliated with SoMLA – the State of Maryland Literacy Association, and ILA – The International Literacy Association. Our local chapter sponsors many philanthropic and professional education events throughout the year.
- ❖ Visit our website for more information, pictures of the YAC ceremony, and an electronic copy of the anthology: <https://easternshoreliteracyassociation.wordpress.com/> .

