

*The Eastern Shore Literacy
Association*

proudly presents:

*Young Authors' Contest
Winners*

2019-2020

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Grade 1 Poetry

“To a Special Mother” – 1st Place Winner

By Serena Jaoude

To a mother that cares
And to a mother that shares
To the smile she wears
And to the caring she cares

I want you to be happy
And just as flappy
As when we play games
To pass the days

I am happy with you
And you are happy with me
Not like Happy Anniversary
But anyway,
Happy Birthday!

Grade 2 Poetry

“Purple” – 1st Place Winner

By Madeleine Cook

Purple is a rainbow.
Purple is a grape.
Purple is feeling like a Happy rainbow.
Purple is the color of a butterfly.
Purple is listening to the piano.
Purple is the color of the sky.
Purple is the smell of a grape marker.
Purple is as Sweet as a cupcake.
Purple is never fake.
Purple is as soft and fluffy as my favorite stuffed animal.

“I Care” – 2nd Place Winner
By La’nya Randall

I care!
I care for my mom
My mom is so nice!

I care!
I care for my grandmother
My grandmother makes me happy every day!

I care!
I care for my sisters
My sisters make me smile!

I care!
I care for my dad
My dad makes me laugh!

I care!
I care for my cousin
My cousin is the coolest cousin ever!
I care for my family!

“Nature” – 3rd Place Winner
By Isabella Rice

Nature
Birds sing chirping songs,
Lions roar “get away!”
Flowers create colorful art,
Groundhogs dig a hole for home,
Noisy tigers growl, “OK!”
Bunnies hop like a dart.
Nature is awesome!

Grade 3 Poetry

“Choppy” –1st Place Winner

By Callan Bergquist

Short, stumpy, and fast
Eyes are light blue with white streaks
His touch is cool like a mist breeze on chilly morning
Like a downpour in the middle of the night
It’s voice like a rough wave crashing against the boat
“Don’t mess with me.”

Water like a roller coaster in an amusement park
Sometimes climbing and sometimes dropping
Bellies uneasy
Never stopping
Tides changing
BOOM!! The boat gets hit by a big wave and then we head to shore.
At last, we are on shore.

“Feelings of Fall”—2nd Place Winner

By Jackson Reddish

The colors of fall excite me.
Red, yellow, and orange I see.
Swirling along in the breeze,
the silently falling leaves.

The nights are long and cool,
and our days are spent at school.
Halloween comes with trick or treats,
so we can get some sweets.

Thanksgiving is about family and friends,
giving thanks until the day ends.
With the cold, harsh winter about to appear,
Fall is my favorite time of the year.

Grade 3 Poetry

“Me”—3rd Place Winner By London Noelle Morton

When you look at me who do you see
No one else looks exactly the way I do
Not him not her and not even you
My eyes, ears, and nose all belong to me
I think I am exactly who I want to be
Mommy says I have a big heart
Daddy tells me I am very smart
My sisters say I am oh so pretty
My brother tells me I am quite witty
When I look in the mirror who do I see
My name is London Noelle and I am just ME

Grade 4 Poetry

“Winter’s Beauty”—1st Place Winner By Cooper Senter

Fresh breeze blows in the air,
Kids are having snowball fights,
Gloves and warm coats to wear,
All the beautiful sights.

Snow floating to the ground,
White and bright,
All the children horsing around,
Until they run out of daylight.

Beautiful Christmas lights,
I hear joyful sleigh bells ringing,
In the chilly nights,
The bluebirds are singing.

The smell of smoke from the fireplace,
Hot cocoa in your mug,
Family is cozy in every place,
Even the cat is curled on the rug.

Grade 4 Poetry

“Your Feelings in Your Head”—2nd Place Winner- Tie By Kinzie Bunting

Do you know
When you're thinking
About something
You do not know what to say?

At my school
There are people
That do not say it.
But you know
That people have
The same problem.

It feels like your
Head is on the ground.
You are sweating
Like never before.
You are running in place
And not going anywhere.
It feels like
Your heart is
Being squished.

You never know
What people
Are going through.
That is why
you should be kind
No matter what.

So always be kind.
And remember
That people have
The same problems.

**“Be a Guiding Light”—2nd Place Winner -Tie
By Ellie Phillips**

An act from inside,
True kindness shines,
All of you is bright,
Be a guiding light.
Bullying is wrong,
Teasing is mean,
You can be a leader that takes the lead.
You know what’s right,
Be a guiding light.

**“Soccer Super Shot”—3rd Place Winner -Tie
By Trezdon Santos**

He kicks it up,
He kicks it out,
He’s gonna take the super shot.
He’s getting ready,
Kissing Betty,
He takes the shot, super steady.
The goalie blocked,
The goalie mocked,
The goalie caught the super shot!
He went to kick - another try.
He thought he’d make it in this time.
He took the shot,
He made it in,
He scored the goal,
He got the win!

**“You Can Do It”—3rd Place Winner -Tie
By Avery Wiltbank**

Sometimes things may get hard
And you might just want to disregard
If you put your mind to it
You can totally do it!!

Sometimes things may not go your way
And you might just want to sail away
If you put your mind to it
You can totally do it!!

Sometimes you may get a bad grade
And you might just want to get it raised
If you put your mind to it
You can totally do it!!

Grade 5 Poetry

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

Running, the wind rushing past my face to greet me for my morning race.
Running, my legs move with effortless grace.

Running, my friend air by my side,
He pushes me forward, pacing my stride.

Now it's race day, and I'm nervous at the starting line.
Bang! I take off running and I feel fine.

Quarter way there, don't get beat by air!
Halfway there, the smell of victory is in the air!

Almost there, the finish line is a sight to behold.
I finished first! I got the gold!

I gave it my all and pushed through the pain,
Practice and speed got me to victory lane!

Grade 5 Poetry

“Curse or Biophilia”—2nd Place Winner By Lucy Gibson

Close your eyes,
Imagine nature,
What do you see?
Flowers, walnuts, and butterflies,
It might just be me!

Close your eyes,
Take a deep breath,
What do you smell?
Flowers, fall and sweet honey air,
It might just be me!

Close your eyes,
WHAT do you feel?
Smooth walnuts and trees I touch with care,
It might just be me!

Close your eyes,
HOW do you feel?
Calm, relaxed, and blessed to be on Earth,
It might just be me!

Am I under some curse?
I don't think so,
It's Biophilia – I am a LOVER OF NATURE!!!

“Trees” — 3rd Place Winner By Karsyn Pete

There used to be these things called trees. Trees gave us air to breathe.
They gave us air when people cared. There was enough for us both to share.
Air was free, there was no fee. The little air we have is now just filled with gas.
You know the Amazon desert used to be the Amazon rainforest. The forest had billions of trees.
With 16,000 different animals. Things took a turn for the worst.
People cut down the trees for streets. And most of those animals are extinct
People stopped caring about trees and cut them down for money.
I wish I could go back and change the past.
Then maybe I would not have to put on a gas mask just to go outside.

Grade 6 Poetry

“The Four Intervals”—1st Place Winner By Adelaide Hope Dawkins

Seeing leaves fall,
Nothing to do,
Catching them,
Is fun,
Jumping in piles of leaves,
Swinging into the bright blue sky,
Falling onto soft grass,
Looking at the sky,
Laughter overcoming you,
Your smile as big as the sky,
But then the Fall is gone,
Bus rides home are endless doom,
All you do is wait,
But when something falls on your face,
Cold,
Sparkly,
Two words,
SNOW DAY!!!
Running through the snow,
Making snowmen,
Sipping hot chocolate,
Cookies,
Christmas morning,
Christmas dinner,
Candy in stockings,
Opening presents,
Church,
Family,
Fun,
But Winter must move on,
Spring pops out of the ground,
Like a tulip
Rain pours down,
Almost drowning plants,

Afterwards, the fresh pine scent,
Fills the air,
The music starts,
With harmonies and melodies,
It's in our houses and in our hearts,
But Springtime must leave,
Into the heat we jump,
Onto the beaches and into the pools,
Endless amounts of swimming,
Up all night,
Dancing,
Yelling,
HOORAY!
For summer is here,
We're out to play,
Every day,
A holiday,
No school while the air is hot,
But we must say,
GOODBYE SUMMER!
HAVE A GOOD DAY!
All the seasons,
Are repeated,
These 4 intervals are our lives.

“Slumber”—2nd Place Winner
By Alex Catlin

I feel my legs weak,
filled with tired muscles.
My head collapse
on my marshmallow, sinking
in slumber, I shiver through sleep,
cold creeps in the air. I pull
up my licorice blanket, sinking
in slumber. I dream of sweets, chocolate
I can taste. When morning comes,
my pillow is gone!

“The Spider Web”—3rd Place Winner
By Hannah Taylor

I found a large spider web
It had different patterns,
—the sun reflected off its web,
flashing off it was a tiny
light. Poking out—
of the green forest trees.
The sun was as hot as
metal on a dry sunny
day. A rainbow appeared
on the spider web strands
of sticky string that grabs
its prey in an instant. Then the
spider would come home
to see the prey in
its sticky string, trap.
The spider would wrap its prey up
Until it was tight
enough to eat.
After its meal it would
go to sleep covered in dew.
The spider would twist and turn
in its sleep. It almost
fell off its web. As the sun
raised upward and the rays hitting the web.
The day would restart.

Grade 7 Poetry

“What did I do”—1st Place Winner

By Johanna Hallman

When I'm underwater,
I feel cold and wet.
I feel as if there is no light,
just darkness.
I feel crippled by the shadows,
hovering above me.

Pressure fills my ears,
lungs feel like they're collapsing.
I struggle trying to reach the surface,
Feeling constrained as the water keeps me under.

I come up out of the water,
my strength regains like I never lost it.
I breathe heavy while catching my breath.
Trying to talk,
but have nothing to say.

Sweat dripping off my face,
I stumble onto land.

I play hide and seek,
and find myself hiding under a tree.
It's chilly and shady.

I decide to come out,
the sun blinding me.

I look up and stare,
my eyes become watery,
trying to fight back the tears,
the ones running down my face.

I run to my room,
slam the door,
as I sink onto the floor.
I sit there wondering, what did I do?

I go to the window,
stare outside.
I begin to remember...

life is full of warmth and light,
although I don't always see it!

Grade 7 Poetry

“Cali’s Elegy”—2nd Place Winner By Josephine Palmer

Cali.
Oh sweet,
sweet,
dog,
everything we’ve been through.

I always knew you were coming.

Your nails,
they gave it away.
I remember,
how the short hairs would come off,
when I would pet you.

I miss you.

I long to bury my face in your fur,
and pet you,
just one more time.

You were very,
very,
special.
The way you were so,
innocent and sweet.
And the way the two white dots,
on your back leg,
made you so unique.

When I hear your name,
I do think of California.
The thought reminds me,
of how sunny,
and pretty,
it is there.
Just like you.

Just because I can’t see you,
doesn’t mean I can’t feel you,
and remember you.
I do still feel you,
and I hope,
you feel me too.

I hope,
you remember the way I look,
because I certainly remember,
what you look like.

I hope,
you remember,
the way I would pet you,
because I remember exactly
how it feels.

I hope,
I’m as special to you,
as you are to me.

I love you,
Cali.
Rest well.

Grade 7 Poetry

“To Whitney Houston, the Name Known by All”—3rd Place Winner By Diva Shrestha

Glorious and notorious but still so troubled,
Using toxic things to remain in your bubble.
You are celebrated and welcomed no matter what, when, or where
As if your name hadn't left the air.

At 22, destiny changed
As you became the diamond of the age,
“Whitney Houston!” yelled the crowd
Waves of cheers, raining down.

Sadly, not a love story left for you,
No “happily ever after” appeared to be true.
Unfortunate, but real,
Because soon your fate will be sealed.

Relaxation before the prize,
Turned out to be your demise.
The bathtub took your dreams and your heart,
But your soul shall forever rest in the words of your art.

Grade 8 Poetry

“Seasons of Our Lives”—1st Place Winner By Mia Lucinda Lovitt

Spring traveling bravely through foggy veil
Arrives on butterfly wings
Delivering seeds of hope: purple pansy,
Red radish, pink petunia, even yellow dandelion.
The new mother beholds her infant’s first smile.

Summer’s fireflies flicker in mason jars.
Eager children catch, then release them to
Night-time skies. Atlantic’s eternal waves thrill
Fun-seeking surfers and sandy-beach campers.
Carnival carousals and Ferris wheel rides pierce
The silent flight of seagulls.

Shades of Autumn’s glory appear in red maple trees,
Yellow school busses, bright blue book bags,
Fat orange pumpkins with gold glowing faces.
Red delicious, Fuji, Granny Smith apples are lovingly
Baked into pies for families gathered giving thanks.
Frenzied furry squirrels store next season’s provisions.

Winter’s earned her well-deserved rest.
Daylight fading, shadows invading: dreamy skaters
Glide over frozen ponds. Tractors hibernate in their barns;
Farmers nap near fireplaces on their farms.
Sunset announces the passage of time as
Mother Earth reveals the seasons of our lives.

Grade 8 Poetry

“Morning Hunt”—2nd Place Winner

By Josh Blume

A cold morning
Remington in my hand
Hunter’s orange on my head
Walking through the dark and sleeping woods
Climbing into my stand blindly, working from memory
Gun cocked and loaded
Ready for anything

Just as the sun pops up from over the trees
The woods erupt with sound as the animals awaken
Big buck walks out
Blood pumping as I put up my gun
Breathe in
Exhale
“POWWWWW”
Direct hit

Shaking from adrenaline
I climb down from the stand
And locate the blood red trail
Following it through thickets and grass
I finally found my buck
Laying hands on it
I say a prayer
Thanking this buck for how it has given me
Meat and happiness
And thanking God for another morning hunt

Grade 8 Poetry

“Better Days”—3rd Place Winner -Tie By Tanner Ellis

I walk through the doors,
Searching for my friends.
 We talk.

 The crowded halls,
Pushing past people,
 Old faces
 New faces
 Memories.

 I meet my locker
and the HORRID lock
 It takes me forever!
I'll get the hang of it.

 I get to class.
Gaze around the room,
and notice that MONSTER!
 The one that lures you in
 like she did to me
No one has solved her crime.

 Great.
 I'm late to lunch
There are no more seats left
Everyone is with their friends
 I can't sit there
 or
 I'm weird
 or

 I'll be alone
 or
They'll make fun of me
 but,
 I see my old friend.
We both sat alone, together.

 I still have one class left
 It goes by quick.

 Finally!

 It's over...
I'm on my way to my locker
 Still struggling to open it.
 I get to go home!

 Walking out of that jail
With the biggest smile on my face
 I made it.

 But we all know that when we get
 home,
Our parents may ask us about the day
 But we all seem to reply with,
 “It was good.”
 Even if we know it wasn't.
Maybe tomorrow will be better.

Grade 8 Poetry

“A Dream”—3rd Place Winner -Tie By Kaiden Bonbright

Not a horrific or exciting dream
Not an action-filled adventure
An indescribable dream
I almost did not have the words
I woke up nearly confused
Almost as if I did not actually wake up
As I explained to my mom the events out loud
Everything of mine lost
Everything I ever had burnt
All my memories erased
All the thoughts in my head disappearing
The people and pictures in my life taken
I sat by the shoreline emotionless
Just nothing
There was nothing I or anyone else could do
I stared out into the horizon
I watched as the white caps of each wave crashed one after the other
As the sun faded into the untold ocean
The feeling of peace
I felt that I was the sea
Confused but still
I don't know why I had a dream so blurry
I do know it taught me a lesson
Whether or not you lose an opal ring
A diamond earring
Or your childhood yearbooks
It is devastating at the beginning
Breathe and take a step back and know
That no matter the loss nothing can take the memories behind them away.

Grade 9 Poetry

“The Sanatorium” —1st Place Winner

By Emily Garlock

The sunlight spies through the window to light up the grey, blank walls
White dresses and sandals
Blue suits and watchful eyes
It's a magnificent dance of man and mind
A woman, the one with the big eyes, dances across the sparkling floor
She collides with the blue suits
The men surround her like flies to an apple
All in what seems to be a competition to whisk her away
But they come not with love in their eyes, but with hostility
Her dance is formidable
The men in blue join her waltz
They give her a hug as she falls numb
These dances seem as routine as the white tablets
In the plastic cups
The calmness rattles when the plastic cups arrive.
They end the chaotic promenade.

“The Earth” —2nd Place Winner

By Riley Moyer

sun sets on the sea
earth takes on a gentle glow
the light is fleeting

night falls on the land
things slow down until dawn falls
a new day begins

Grade 9 Poetry

“Poem” —3rd Place Winner By Emily O’Brien

They say
for you to “follow your heart”
But if your heart is in thousands of pieces
Which part do you follow
Some say no matter how
Hard your shattered heart is aching
There will always be beauty from the breaking
And there is always a risk worth taking
Now with your broken heart
In a thousand pieces on the floor
words fall short in times like these
When this world drives you to your knees
Will you get back up with a ferocity
That makes the earth tremble with ease
For it knows your heart will not be
In a thousand pieces on the ground
Now your shattered heart isn’t aching
There will always be beauty from the breaking
And there is always a risk worth taking

Grade 10 Poetry

“A Penny” —1st Place Winner By Maya Matava

I didn't really love
any
of those girls.

Their faces,
so similar.
Lips,
painted red.
Eyelids
smeared with silver.

Their hair?
Always perfect.
Always curled.

I don't really think,
that any,
of those girls,
loved
me.

There is one,
that I remember.
One that I could never
forget.

Her face,
so different,
lips,
never painted.
She told me she hated the taste. Eyelids,
smeared with copper.
Silver,
she said,
was far too overused.

Her hair?
Jet black.
Never styled
the same way.

She told me,
once,
that everyone
tried too hard
to be perfect.

Perfection.
Ruled by numbers.
A scale,
of one
to ten.

She told me,
once,
that it would be better,
to be a penny,
than a dime,
if every dime was the same.

A sea of perfection
of perfect tens,
of dimes,
she said,
would be,
no fun,
at all.

Be the penny,
in the sea of dimes,
she said,
because really,
imperfections
are what make you so perfect.

“Unchanged” —2nd Place Winner
By Brooke Phillips

How could those who saw suffering and pain remain unchanged?

These soldiers who did not blink an eye, who saw blood go down the drain, remained:

Unchanged.

Those who killed and ended the life of many Jews without hesitation, remained:

Unchanged

Death, not occasioned, occurred in the malignant prowling sight of the soldiers remained:

Unchanged

For those who might try to escape, were shot and downed, the soldiers remained:

Unchanged

The skin of innocent, browned and crisp, flames licking the flesh. Even with this, the soldiers remained:

Unchanged

The soldiers, tricking the Jews to shower, asphyxiated the innocent souls. These soldiers still remained:

Unchanged

Those with good hearts who tried to remain unchanged became deranged.

But for those, who were true believers in Hitler’s propaganda, remained:

Unchanged

“Betrayal”—3rd Place Winner
By Alexis Robertson

Stone cold faces

staring, wondering,

hoping light will come

Pain shooting through the heart

Breaking the soul like shattered glass

Cutting deeper than any knife

Hitting the body like a train

Waiting patiently for words to come

But nothing does

Except betrayal

Grade 11 Poetry

“The Lost Girl”—1st Place Winner By Ki-Jhae Bull

The Lost Girl

was born on a small shore where everyone knew each other,
the year of Space Shuttle Columbia disaster, wish these years
Went by faster

my first nest was a little, small town for lovers, no sidewalks,
No place to play, just chicken plants, crops everywhere,
No place to play

my second home was nearby, somewhere to play, small town, one school,
middle school, roots, never wanted to leave this town,
Small but cool

on a sad day, I moved to a terrible town, school was a prison,
we were the inmates, they controlled what we put on our backs, bullied and hacked,
Because I was too black

every day was a cry, she was only in 5th grade, she wanted to go
back to the small town, had to grow up faster take care of her little brother,
Mom couldn't afford a back track

dad was there, mom and dad screamed every night, dad was unfaithful, so was mom, they only stayed
together because

We were their spoons

twelve now, they are divorced, mom leaves and takes us, we cry we didn't want to leave the little, small
town, or dad

He was sad

I was twelve, nothing I could do, mom was depressed, a mysterious house and five mouths to feed, one
day

Mom escaped and never looked back

we move back to the little, small town, mom thought I was clueless, she cried “money isn't everything”
Love will come back

fourteen, mom met a man, dad met a woman, who made me and brother happy, they were happy,
Jumped the broom

sixteen now, living in the small town, where I can play, my life hasn't always been
Yellow sometimes gray

today, want to stay, in the little, small town, now I am the lost girl

Who was found

Grade 11 Poetry

“Notre Dame”—2nd Place Winner By Hannah Perdue

When the roof collapses
On the history of our world
Our people weep
And scream with the aching timbers

The cathedral
Bleeding fire
Holds a mirror to our faces
And echoes our prideful shouts of opposition
Begging us to extend our hands
And harmonize
With the music of foreign tongues

Our past
Makes vulnerable her heart to burn
So all may comprehend
The weight of temporariness
And the necessity of unity
In the flame-lit darkness
While others in the world
Remain hardened
By distrust and easy hatred
A fact buried in the rubble
Of identities
Shrouded by race and religion

Grade 11 Poetry

“Empty House”—3rd Place Winner By Waverly Choy

I climb out of the car
“Thank you, have a good night”
The monotonous words are left floating
The metal door shuts leaving me isolated
The scene is left unsatisfying

My feet flatten damp leaves along the driveway
The cold is relentless against my skin
The surrounding darkness slowly creeps into my thoughts
Something urges me to stay outside
But I walk beneath faded stars
Listening to my echoing footsteps
My dwindling fingers find the four worn numbers on the keypad
All the sky sees is a routine well-rehearsed
Shoved to the brink of becoming nothing
But an empty action

I step inside
Locking the door behind me
1, 2, 3 times
Somehow it’s darker inside this home than out
Somehow I feel more empty
Every light turned off with people’s absence
Every voice taken somewhere else
Every other noise suddenly hiding

With silence stained into these walls
I stand motionless for a moment
Heavy curtains for eyes
Dragging to a yielding close
Every drop of quietness somehow echoing loudly through my cave of a body
Here I stand
Truly alone

Grade 12 Poetry

“Florida’s Unstable Painter”—1st Place Winner

By Marvin Mason

We all have those days
 Where there is a will
 There is a way
 Nobody truly knows how you feel
 So you ask yourself
 Are these emotions even real?
 You sit down
 With a frown
 While everyone around
 Has on crowns
 While you’re trying to deal
 With this emotional break down
 You felt as though you were on top of Mount Everest. Now you think that you’re the best. That you can always outshine the rest. That all changes. **BOOM.** In that instant you don’t mean anything. You look around and there’s no life. Not one breath had been drawn, from the air, none other than your own.
 Bodies... 17 accounted bodies
 Lying still
 Begin to fill
 The back of your mind
 Who, what, how, why?
 Who did this?
 How can one man do such a thing?
 Why would you turn these moving targets into a still life portrait painted by bullets and colored by blood?
 Who... You ask yourself.
 He, he who held that gun.
 What... Trying to figure out what happened.
 For the reason of instability, couldn’t find peace or nirvana.
 How... Races through your mind.
 With ease, just three simple steps.
 1. Fire – fire the gun
 2. Empty – empty the clip into 14 targets
 3. Escape – escape from the horrible painting you have just created for Florida and all to see.
 Why... The last thing you could possibly think of.
 For fun
 To test out my new gun
 Then run
 Then and now my work here is DONE.

Grade 12 Poetry

“A Great Oak, An Empty Lot”—2nd Place Winner By Devin Wallace

Tall, towering over all around
Providing shade
Protective
A large oak
Shielding all beneath it

Impressive, aged and wise
Seeing years of hardships
Searching
Endlessly underground for sustenance
To continue on

Alone, singular in a field
Lost friends
Gone
Forever from past years
A legacy to continue

Gone, slowly the pain recedes
Joining its comrades
Empty
The lot now stands
With no shade

Grade 12 Poetry

“To the Sea”—3rd Place Winner By Chloe Westbrook

A girl was born long ago
When the ides of August
Fell to the sea

A girl that was born long ago
Was drawn to things
That brought tides to land

A girl that was born long ago
Intertwined her legs in
A rose with many thorns

A girl that was born long ago
Brought that rose
To the sea

A girl that was born long ago
Made that rose
Shed its thorns

I was a woman born today
When I lost the
Man that shed his thorns

For me
To the sea

Grade 1 Short Story

***The Bad Dragon* —1st Place Winner**

By Luke Holder

Once upon a time there was a dragon, three pigs, and two dogs.

The dragon ruled the world. The dragon was very scary. He could spit out fire.

The Dragon was hungry it was time to eat. The Dragon wanted to eat the three pigs for lunch.

The pigs ran behind a tree. The dragon spit fire and the tree blew up.

Two dogs came and said, “Hop on”.

The pigs hopped on the dogs back and the dogs ran away really fast. The pigs were saved!

The dragon gave up so he flew away and never came back!

The End.

***Camp* — 2nd Place Winner**

By Ava Gibbs

One-day Ava was going to Camp and her job was to make s'mores.

Ava went to Walmart to get graham crackers, marshmallows and chocolate.

When Ava got to camp she collected sticks to make the fire. She put the sticks in a triangle and rubbed two sticks together to make fire. She was ready to make s'mores. Ava went to get the food and it was gone!

Ava looked up, her food was up in a tree. A squirrel had taken all of the food! She said “give me back my food!” The squirrel said “no”! Ava had to think. She saw nuts. She held up the nuts for the squirrel. The squirrel dropped the food. Ava got the food back and made s'mores for everyone.

The end.

Grade 2 Short Story

The Weird Camping Trip— 1st Place Winner

By Montane Kilgoe

Once upon a time, there were three friends going camping in the woods. They were Ava, Jazlynn, and me. We all meet at Ava's house. We were excited because we never went camping before. The air was cool and crisp. You could actually see the breath coming out of our mouths. Ava's mother Amanda was the one who made sure we had everything packed and ready for our camping trip. We piled in the car. It should have been an hour's drive.

The name of the camping site was "Big Bear Lake". The children at school told us stories of that camping site. So, we were half scared and half excited. We played car games on our way there like I spy and rock, paper, scissors, shoot. After 3 hours, we finally got to the camping site because Ava's mom kept going the wrong way. We should have known something was going to happen then. Our tent was purple, pink, red and blue. We took everything to our tent and when we came out of our tent, we saw a beautiful turkey. My friend Ava said, "What in the world is that?" and I said, "Ava, that's a big turkey"! Jazlynn didn't say anything because she was scared of everything just like me. After we unpacked, we decided to tour the area.

We started walking in the woods the trees were so thick and the leaves had started changing colors and falling on the ground. The leaves were bright red, orange, yellow and green against the bluish evening sky. You could hear the birds singing in the trees. It sounded like footsteps behind us. We thought it was the other campers exploring too. But Jazlynn went to peek to see if it was another group of campers. But Jazlyn screamed and said, "RUN"! It was a BEAR! So, we all begin to run as fast as we could. Thank goodness we outran the bear. Then we bumped into what we thought was another camper, but it was a creepy looking man who said he was a farmer looking for his pigs. Ava said, "I'll bet the bear ate his pigs". Then I said, "Jazlynn are you sure it was a bear or the farmers pigs"?

After we all calmed down, we started taking pictures of the tree and the sky. We looked at all of the pictures and one seemed just a little odd. It looked like there was a strange shadow hovering over us in some of the pictures. Then we thought we figured out what the shadows were. Then we all screamed, "GHOSTS"! The same ghosts the kids at the school told us about. I closed my eyes and said, "NO, NO, NO, I don't believe in ghosts". I opened my eyes and they were still on our picture. Then I closed my eyes even tighter and it seemed in a distance. I heard my mom's voice calling, "Wake up, wake up. It's time for your camping trip". I couldn't believe it was all a scary dream. My mom said, "Honey, get up, you are going to be late". I said, "Mommy, I don't want to go" and my mom said, "Why"? I looked at mommy and said, "Believe me, YOU DON'T WANT TO KNOW"!

The End.

***A Furry Birthday* — 2nd Place Winner**
By Lily Grace Kirby

Lily got a new puppy for her birthday. The puppy made Lily happy, so she took her for walks, fed her and played with her. She got her toys because the puppy liked chewing and she got her bones so she wouldn't chew on Lily's shoes.

Lily named the puppy, Rylie. Rylie began getting used to her new home and not living with her mom, brothers and sisters. Rylie seemed lonely so Lily bought her a bunny named Lizzie. But, Lizzie did not like playing with Rylie. So, Lily got a fish. Lily named the fish, Finley.

One night, Lily and her mom were eating and saw Finley jump out of her fishbowl to play with Rylie. Rylie tried to eat Finley, but Lily's mom scooped Finley off the floor and back in the water. Shew. That was close. Maybe, a fish isn't a good friend for a puppy.

Lily asked her mom if they could get another puppy. Lily thought a puppy would be a better friend than a bunny or a fish. Rylie's farm still had one of her sister's, so Lily and her mom went to pick-up Rylie's sister. Rylie was so happy when they got home.

Lily named her Kennedy. The two puppies loved each other. Lily thought they needed more friends. And, within a few months, the house was filled with puppies.

They had so much fun together. They played in the pool and in the yard. And when the season's changed, they played in the leaves and the snow.

One day, they knocked down a snowman that Lily had built with her mom. Lily thought they were cold after knocking down the snowman, so Lily made the puppies some hot chocolate. It seemed to make them warm and happy. This made Lily happy.

Lily was sad when she had to go to school and leave her puppies but knew they'd keep each other company and lookout for the bunny and the fish. Lily can't wait for school to end so they can spend all day together and celebrate all their birthdays including Lily's.

Lily will be 8 year's old next summer and thinks it will be the best birthday ever with all her pets at the party. Maybe, they'll all go for a swim in the pool. Even the bunny and the fish.

***Sarah and Jack: School Shopping* — 3rd Place Winner**
By Anna McCormack

Chapter 1: Backpacks

Sarah and Jack are going school shopping. First, they went to the backpack aisle. Sarah chose a backpack that was blue with pink bunnies on it. Jack chose a backpack that was blue with soccer balls on it.

Chapter 2: Lunchboxes

Then, Sarah and Jack found the lunch boxes before their moms did. Then Sarah and Jack started looking for their lunchboxes. And then Sarah chose a lunch box with blue on it and pink bunnies on it. And Jack chose a lunch box that was blue with soccer balls on it.

Sarah asked her mom, “Where are we going next?”

And Sarah’s mom said, “Where we’re going next is...”

Chapter 3: Composition Books

...journals!”

“Yay! How many can we get Mom?” said Jack.

Sarah and Jack got the same journals. They got a rainbow one, a purple one, a light blue one, a blue one with pink bunnies on it, and a blue one with soccer balls on it.

Chapter 4: Pencil Pouches

Now, Sarah and Jack are going to the pencil pouches. Sarah got a pencil pouch that was blue and it was furry. Jack got a pencil pouch that was blue.

Chapter 5: Art Supplies

Now, Sarah and Jack are heading to the art supplies. Sarah and Jack are getting their art supplies. Sarah and Jack are getting the same art supplies they chose: glue, scissors that were light blue, colored Crayola pencils, Crayola crayons, and Crayola super tip markers.

Chapter 6: Old Friends

Sarah and Jack and their parents started to head to the checkout counter, but when they were heading to the checkout counter, they saw their old friends! Then, they started talking about who their teacher was for second grade.

Chapter 7: Leaving

Sarah and Jack said goodbye to their friends because they had to leave. Then, they checked out their school supplies. And then, they hopped in the car and left to go to another store.

Grade 3 Short Story

Why?— 1st Place Winner

By Ellie Wells

It's a beautiful day at the Outer Banks I notice as we are driving to the beach. We are finally here! *Crunch, crunch!* is the satisfying noise I hear when I sink my feet into the sand as we're walking to the spot where we will rest for the day. When I get to the spot, I look out into the serene ocean with pelicans soaring overhead.

As I'm applying sunscreen onto my tanning body, my eyes shift to the fabulous sand. I stop, pick up a handful of sand, and let it slip through my fingers, one grain, then two, then it's dropping like rain falling from the sky.

When I'm done with the sunscreen, I put it back in the beach bag and start walking toward the ocean.

"Ellie!" my Mom calls out to me. "Did you put on your sunscreen?!"

"Yes!" I shout. I start walking toward the water.

"Ellie! Did you put on your sunscreen?!"

"Yes," I mumble. I start walking toward the water with my eyes focused on the imprints I'm making. As I get closer to the water, the sand starts to feel damp. I raise my head up. There it is, the ocean. I take my first step into the ocean. It. Feels. FABULOUS!!!! "Dad come get in!" I shout.

"Ok," my dad says. I glance into the ocean.

"It is not very clear," I tell my dad.

"Well," my Dad said, "you can at least reach down to the floor."

"True" I said, "I'll do that!" Splash, splash! "I found a shell!" I said.

"Wow!" my dad said. "Go put it at our spot."

"Ok!" I say excitedly. I step one foot onto the dry sand, then the other. I raise my foot up off the sand to take a step towards our spot. Sand is stuck to the bottom of my foot. My foot gets drier and drier and drier as I make my way back to our spot. "Hi Mom!" I said.

"Hello!" my mom replied. "Is that a shell?" my mom asked.

"Yes!" I said. "Where is my bag?" I asked. "I need to put my shell in there so I can keep looking for shells!" I exclaimed.

"It's in the bag," my mom said.

"Thanks," I said. I return back into the ocean. "Did you find anything?" I asked.

"No," my dad said. I reach back into the ocean...

"DAD!!!! I think I just touched a fish!"

Two hours later...

"Ellie! Go see what he has!" my mom said as she points to a fisherman on the shore.

"Ok!" I said. As I approach him I see a shark tail. And all this time I've been wondering what I had touched. A slimy. Scaly. Shark tail.

***A Little Mouse* — 2nd Place Winner**
By Yamose Alazy

Once upon a time, there lived a little mouse. He was not like the other mice because he made a home of his own out of some leaves and sticks from the trees. He also added some bags of cheese from the street. There was a tree trunk right across from the house of a lonely old man named Mr. K who loved animals, so the mouse made his home in the tree trunk.

One winter morning, the mouse had no food at all. He had eaten all the cheese from the street and he was starving. That morning after a minute of looking out his window, a figure with a furry coat, some long boots, and blue gloves was handing out a bag of bird seed when he noticed the mouse. Mr. K realized the mouse was hungry, so he ran inside and got some food for the poor little mouse.

He thought that there was some cheese in the refrigerator. When he got in the house, he realized there was some cheese on the counter so he picked it up and ran back to the mouse. He gave the little animal a piece of cheese. Then he thought that mice can't survive in this winter with a home like that, so he got some wood and a hammer and put it on the counter. Next, he ran outside and grabbed the mouse, wrapped him in a blanket, and got to work.

He started making the little mouse a home out of wood. He finally made the house on the same tree trunk. In his mind, he wanted to go to sleep, so he walked back inside leaving all the wood and the hammer outside. He picked up the little mouse and said, "I shall name you Kane. You will love a big, big surprise." He walked slowly outside with the mouse and he hummed a tune while walking. "Hmmm, hmmm, hmmm." They reached the surprise and he put the mouse inside and went back in to go to sleep.

That night it was different. Mr. K felt something breathing down his neck, a tail wrapped around his toe, and a fluffy finger on him. He was so scared his eyes were clamped shut. He couldn't open them. He was shivering and barely opened his mouth to scream. Then a slight movement happened. The thing had disappeared. As the sun rose, he woke up with such tears in his eyes that they were red as strawberries.

After breakfast, he got his bag. It had sunscreen and a towel that hasn't been used yet. He went outside and called 165-789-116916 on his phone. "Hi. I would like a ride to the beach please. Ok. Thank you." After 1 hour, a taxi parked right in front of his home. When he got in, the taxi man said, "That will be \$3.99 please." Mr. K said, "Please can I pay when I get back? I will need another ride home. Please I will be done at 3:00pm." The taxi driver said, "Certainly sir, but that will be \$5.99 please. So, the car drove and Mr. K went to sunbathe right next to the ocean.

Then after Mr.K started to doze for a moment, the same thing happened like last night! At the beach, he felt like a mouse's tail was laying on his stomach and a mouse's body was on his face because it felt fluffy.

"I really, really think it's a mouse," said Mr. K. He slowly opened his eyes and realized it was a mouse! His mouse friend Kane had tagged along because he just wanted to share the day with him. That day Mr. K learned to always open his eyes before he jumped to conclusions.

The Doll That Brought Good Luck— 3rd Place Winner
By Elias Baldrige

Times were tough for me and my family. We couldn't afford to live in our house anymore because Mom lost her job and Dad's restaurant was struggling because it wasn't making enough money. So, my family moved to a smaller house in the next town over called Lockville.

One day after we moved, me and my little sister, Becky, rode our bikes around the neighborhood. I saw a box in a driveway that said "Free." I looked inside. There were a bunch of toys. I searched the box and found a weird doll at the bottom. It was as small as a mouse, made of orange cloth with legs, arms, button eyes, and a mouth but no clothes. I put the doll in my pocket and Becky and I headed home.

Riding back to our house, my bike's front tire popped and I flew off the seat. Luckily, I landed in grass, not on the road, so I wasn't hurt. At home, I went to my room and took the doll from my pocket and tossed it onto my bed. Then my bedroom door slammed shut. I pulled on it, but it was locked.

"I guess this is why they call the town Lockville," I joked. While I was struggling with my door, I saw something under my bed. It was the doll.

"How did it get there?" I wondered. "It must have fallen down. Things so far have been strange." I picked it up and put it back on my bed.

Suddenly the door pushed open and Becky came in. "Why did you shut your door?" she asked.

"I didn't! It slammed shut and locked on its own!" I replied.

"What's that?" Becky asked pointing to the doll.

"Some weird doll I found when we were on our bikes," I said.

"It looks like a voodoo doll! Aren't they bad luck?" she asked.

"Oh, leave me alone!" I said. Becky left laughing.

I turned around and the doll wasn't on my bed. "Where'd it go?" I wondered. I saw a tiny orange hand behind some boxes. It was the doll.

"Weird!" I picked it up and threw it back on my bed. Then the doll stood up and started talking.

"You don't understand Benny. I want to help you," it whispered. I couldn't believe my eyes. Was a doll actually talking?

"I want to help you!" the doll said again.

"Y-you must be bad luck. Dolls don't talk!" I said nervously.

"No, I'm good luck!" it said.

"But what about my tire and my door? That wasn't good luck was it?" I asked.

"I was trying to get your attention! I want to help you help your family," it said. I still couldn't believe I was talking to a doll. I rubbed my eyes in case I was seeing things. But no, there it stood, alive and talking!

"Ok," I said slowly. "You can help."

The doll said, "I have one rule. You can't tell anyone about me."

"Deal," I said.

We worked on ideas all afternoon. By dinner, we had a plan!

The next morning, I talked to Dad. “I was thinking of how to make money at the restaurant. Can I put on a comedy show with my doll during dinner?” I asked.

“Brilliant!” said Dad.

After practicing, we were ready for our performance. I dressed in nice clothes and put the doll in one of Becky’s old doll’s suits. At the restaurant, there were more cars than usual in the parking lot.

“People must be excited to see you and your little buddy!” Mom said. I was so nervous my legs felt wobbly and I had butterflies in my stomach. Every table inside was filled!

On stage, Dad spoke into a microphone. “Please give it up for my son, Benny, and his doll!” Dad yelled. I walked onstage and sat in a chair behind the microphone. I put the doll on my shoulder.

“Hi! We’re here to make you laugh.” I looked at the doll and said, “What’s brown, hairy and wears sunglasses?”

“A coconut on vacation!” it replied. The crowd laughed.

I looked at the doll, “Why did the banana go to the doctor?”

“Because it wasn’t peeling well!” it said. The crowd laughed again. For 30 minutes, we told jokes and the audience clapped and laughed. We were a hit!

The next morning Dad said, “Benny, thanks to you and your doll, I think my restaurant is saved! Everyone loved the show! I think I could do different types of shows at dinner, like musicians, singers, art shows, and of course more comedy! If this works, I think the restaurant will be successful!”

I smiled at the doll and then Dad.

“So, we did it?” I asked.

“Yep!” said Dad.

Grade 4 Short Story

***The Doggie Dance Club* — 1st Place Winner**

By Ryan Shipp

Have you ever wondered what your pets do at night while you are asleep?

It all started when Coco the pug got bored one late evening. She paced around uselessly looking for something to do. She stopped and nibbled on the blinds, but she quickly backed away because she knew her owner would find out and would be cross. Then, she glanced out the window at the old vacant house across the street that no one would buy.

Coco decided to visit her friend Pommie the Pomeranian. Quickly, she leapt through her doggie door and waddled next door to Pommie’s house. Upon entering the house, she heard a voice say, “I wasn’t expecting any visitors tonight!” Pommie leapt off the table and sat on the carpet next to Coco.

“I am dying of boredom,” yipped Coco, while licking her paws.

“Let’s raid the treat cabinet,” said Pommie, grinning.

“That sounds awesome,” replied Coco.

Pommie, the excellent kicker that she was, kicked the cabinet until it opened. She knocked down the Milk Bones with her nose and shredded the bag. Coco and Pommie had a feast.

“Have you ever heard of a dance club?” asked Pommie.

“I’ve never heard of such a thing,” replied Coco.

“A dance club is a place where you dance all night long with your friends,” informed Pommie.

“Sounds fun,” said Coco with a mouthful of Milk Bone.

“You are a genius!” barked Pommie with joy. “We can start our own dance club!”

“Where should we host it?” asked Coco.

“Oh, oh, I know! We can host it in that vacant house for sale,” said Pommie.

“Shush!” hissed Coco, “You are going to wake your owners.”

“Sorry,” said Pommie.

The two dogs pranced over to the vacant house. Pommie kicked the door open and motioned for Coco to come along.

“It is really dark in here,” said Coco shivering with her hair raised.

“Are you a cat, a scared-y cat?” mocked Pommie.

“No, why would I be scared?” said Coco, fixing herself in a brave posture.

“HELLO!!!” barked a very deep voice. It was Everest. Everest was a Golden Retriever and the neighborhood stray.

“Get out! Get out!” said Pommie, growling. “This is our territory!”

“Gee! Sorry!” said Everest, backing away from Pommie.

“We are making this place into a dance club. Care to help us spruce it up?” asked Pommie, giving Everest her best puppy eyes.

“Sure” said Everest. “Just let me dig up this hole.”

After several minutes of digging, Everest popped up with a disco ball in his mouth.

“Where did you find that?” asked Pommie suspiciously.

“My secret stash, of course,” replied Everest, grinning his best smile.

Everest popped his head back into the hole and came back up with a spotlight in his mouth. Pommie’s eyes widened and her tiny jaw dropped. The three dogs hung up the disco ball and plugged in the spotlight. Coco found an old radio that still worked and tapped the power button with her nose so the music blared. Soon, all three dogs were dancing, chasing their tails, and howling with laughter. All the neighborhood pets heard the music and joined in. After that day, pets were never bored again, all because of the doggie dance club...and that is why your pets like to sleep so much during the day!

Seven Minute Mile— 2nd Place Winner

By Reed Luppens

Chapter One

0 min: 00 sec

It’s 37 degrees out but it doesn’t feel cold to me for some reason. My stomach is twisted in knots. The runners around me are getting warmed up... some jogging, some sprinting. I don’t want to waste my energy so I concentrate my thoughts on the race.

I walk up to the starting line. I try to position myself toward the front but the other runners are all pushing to be first in line.

I scan the crowd of people watching. My mom said she would be here, but I don't see her anywhere.

I look down at my shoes. I got new shoes the other day but I decided to wear my old ones because I'm more comfortable racing in them. They are a little small, but they are my favorite.

A man is talking now. The crowd is quiet. He is giving instructions on the race and telling us to stay on the path around the city park.

I'm hoping someone at my school will place high in the rankings. Last time I got a seven minute and five second mile. Today I'm going to beat my record. I'm going for a seven-minute mile.

"Runners, take your marks!"

BANG!

I was off.

Chapter Two

1 min: 06 sec

I'm in the middle of the pack. Some people started off sprinting as fast as they could. I'm trying to pace myself.

There is a lot of pushing and shoving out of the start. Up ahead, I see a boy trip and fall. I am trying to distance myself from the other runners.

"Looking good! Pace yourself!" I hear a familiar voice. Is it in my head? I look around and see my mom standing under a nearby tree. She's here! I pick up my pace.

Chapter Three

2 min: 17 sec

I'm starting to get a little tired. Still not at the halfway point yet.

Suddenly something feels weird. What am I kicking? I look down and see my shoelace bouncing around. Oh no. I can either stop to tie my shoe and lose time or keep going and take a chance on losing my shoe.

I stop on the side of the path. Hurry up! My hands won't work fast enough.

As soon as the laces are tied, I feel a little better. The break actually helped me. I feel rested after the 20 second stop.

I cross over the little bridge and keep heading through the park.

Chapter Four

3 min: 34 sec

There are a bunch of beautiful trees above. I am hoping that the pretty scenery keeps me distracted, but I'm struggling.

I need to think of something to keep me motivated. My mom said she sings to herself when she runs. I'm trying to think of a song.

Crap. The only one I can think of... Oh no. Please don't be this song.

A... B... C... D... E...F... G...

This is terrible. Now it's stuck.

H... I... J... K... L... M... N... O... P...

I look around hoping for another distraction. There are no people playing on the swing set. I turned and check the runners behind me.

Q... R... S... T... U... V...

In front of me runners are starting to get tired. People are stopping to walk. I've got to keep going!

W... X... Y... Z...

I'm about halfway through the race.

Chapter Five

4 min: 30 sec

I am starting to get a cramp. The pain shoots through my stomach with each step. I can't slow down because I've already stopped once. If I'm going to beat my record, I have to run through the pain. I have to stay determined.

A... B... C... D... E... F... G...

Chapter Six

5 min: 42 sec

I see the finish line ahead. I have to make my move soon.

A crowd of people line the sides of the running path. Everyone is cheering.

"Nice job, keep going! Sprint it out!" I hear my mom's voice above the others.

It's time.

My legs take off. I'm flying. I'm passing people, one after the next. I have to keep this pace to the finish line if I want to break my record.

I have to give it everything I've got. I don't know if I can make it.

Chapter Seven

6 min: 37 sec

My chest feels like it's going to explode. My legs feel numb. I still feel the cramp in my stomach.

I am sprinting as fast as I can.

I close my eyes. I take my last few strides, and leap across the finish line. I fall to the ground.

Now I know my ABCs. Next time won't you sing with me.

The End

7 min: 00 sec

***Inside* — 3rd Place Winner**
By Ben Rafinski

Jay and Derek were best friends and loved to tell each other scary stories. One afternoon at a sleepover, Jay told Derek a story that would change their lives forever.

“Years ago, some teenagers wandered into a house. Inside, they heard a voice and then the door shut and they heard the click of the lock. They tried to pick the lock with a paperclip but it wouldn’t budge. People say they were trapped forever,” Jay explained. His tall and skinny but athletic body had started to shiver and it was seventy-four degrees outside. Derek realized he was also afraid.

“You can stop if this is already too scary for you,” Derek said.

“What does the house look like?” Derek asked.

“It’s the white house on Berry Street,” Jay replied.

“Really? That house is nice. It is well painted, has beautiful flowers and all those things that could make any house look nice,” Derek said.

“The ghosts and monsters just MAKE it look nice,” Jay said. “They do this so that they get more visitors. More visitors mean more victims.”

“Well then let’s go,” said Derek.

“Go where?” Jay asked. He looked like this when he saw the best sports team lose to the worst sports team. He was that confused.

“To the house, duh,” Derek said. “Where else would I want to go, McDonalds?” Derek was always a daredevil like this.

“Are you insane? Why would I do that? You can go and die but I’ll stay here and wait for the headline! I can already see it ‘11-Year-Old Boy Found Dead in Haunted House’, so no I’m not going,” Jay responded harshly. As a matter of fact, it was the harshest way Jay had ever spoken to him.

Derek knew there was a way to get Jay to go with him. He promised to let Jay ride his new skateboard whenever he wanted.

“Ok fine, let’s go,” Jay said. “But when it gets dark the doors shut and lock,” Derek checked his watch. It read 5:07. It was summer, so the sun went down at 9:20.

“Mom, can we go to Max’s house?” Jay asked.

“Sure, but be home by 10:30,” she responded.

“Thanks Mom,” Jay said. Then the boys marched to the haunted house, not knowing how this would change their life. Derek checked his watch. It read 5:16.

“We have four hours and four minutes. The sun goes down at 9:20. I googled it,” Derek said.

“Are you rounding, because if you are, that could cost us our life,” Jay said, extremely concerned.

“No, it’s exact,” Derek replied.

“Good,” said Jay.

Then with his eyes almost shut, Jay opened the door. As the door creaked open, he looked inside and saw writing on the living room wall. It said: Good luck surviving.

Not wanting to give up yet, they nodded to each other and ventured up the stairs. They looked up and saw an old man. Thinking he was a ghost, they screamed and sprinted down the steps.

“Wait!” called the old man.

“Are you a ghost?” Derek answered, frightened as ever.

“I’m a real man. The stories you’ve heard about this house are true but they happened a century ago. I’ve lived here for 40 years and nothing has happened. But don’t walk out yet young folks. Before the ghosts left, they cursed the house, so you should listen to the consequences if you choose to leave. If you boys leave this house right now, you will have aged 30 years and 30 years of time will have passed. If you stay until dark, you will have aged five years but no time will have passed,” the old man said.

So, the boys decided to stay. They played Boggle with the man until 9:30 and when they left, they realized the man was right about the curse.

“I never thought I would almost have a beard when I’m 17!” Jay said confused.

He had some scissors in his pockets so he chopped his beard off. Derek used to be an average looking kid, but now, he was super buff.

The path back home was a little different. There were some new stores and buildings. The biggest change was when they turned around to glance at the house they left 10 seconds ago, it was GONE.

When they got home, Jay’s mom had to look at them twice before she realized they had changed. “Derek, you have grown some BIG muscles. Did Max’s bench press help you? What about you Jay, did you get any muscles?” she asked.

“No,” Jay responded. “But stuff changes when you have an adventure with your best friend.” Jay glanced at Derek and couldn’t wait for their next sleepover.

Grade 5 Short Story

***Just Keep Running* — 1st Place Winner**

By Madison Wheeler

“All Cross-Country finalists, please report to the gym at this time,” a voice said over the loudspeaker. I quickly put away my math notebook, and then looked over at my math teacher who gave me a curt nod. I opened the creaky wood door to see my best friend Vivien Cropper (also a finalist) was heading to the gym just as I was.

She scooted over towards me and asked, “Are you nervous?” “Very,” I responded. We walked the rest of the way in silence, the sound of butterflies flapping their wings in my stomach. When Vivien and I got to the gym, Mrs. McCauley was calling attendance.

“Madison Wheeler!” she called. “Here!” I said. After everyone was called and accounted for, we waited for Mr. Catron to come back from the office. *Will we win* I thought to myself? Then I saw Mr. Catron’s thin face and sweatpants.

“Time to go!” they both said. Our team walked down the long narrow hallway and out the large metal doors. The cold air brushed my skin like ice cubes. The squeaky bus doors opened and all of us rushed inside to get away from the cold air. Then I saw Vivien waving me over in seat 16, so I go and plop myself down. I let my frigid body lean against the soft warm seat. Then something weird happened. I felt my nerves go away as I looked around and saw everyone talking and laughing. *This is a weird feeling; I think I like it* I thought. But just then the bus came to a jolt and the nerves came back.

“All right guys, single file line off the bus!” said Mr. Catron. It was more of a jumble, but we made it off okay. Now, I was tired of the warm bus, so the chilly air felt good. As I looked around at the beautiful fall trees, I thought back to the time we were all trying out. I never thought I would make it this far, none of us did. But look at us now at the championship!

“Madison, Madison, hello!” a familiar voice snapped me out of my thoughts. I realized it was Vivien.

“Maddie come on! We are moving to a spot,” she said. Then Vivien led me over to a cone that said Pittsville on it.

“All right guys let’s start warming up!” yelled Mrs. McCauley. After our warmup, the girls were called to the starting line. I was squished between two girls and did not have any room. I saw Mayor Jake Day holding a sound gun so everyone could hear.

“3,2,1, Boom!” and we were off to the races. *Wow, everyone is not pacing themselves* I thought. I pass a lot of people and go from a jog to a sprint. After the next corner, I see my little sister Cassidy holding a sign that says don’t give up.

Then suddenly every muscle in my body urges me to go forward. Before I knew it, I crossed the finish line. My parents ran up to hug me and say good job. I finished in 12 and Vivien got 36. I was so proud of us.

“Cross-Country teams please report over to the center!” a man called. Out of our team, Mackenzie and Conner both got 3 places. Then it was time to announce the winning teams.

“Runner up goes to…… Westside!” yelled the mayor. Everyone on our team grabbed hands and waited for the overall winner.

“The 2018 Cross-Country winners are……Pittsville!” A feeling of joy swept across my heart and everyone was hugging.

We ran up to get our trophy, and I saw a feeling of hate sweep across the other teams faces. *Don’t let them bring you down*, I thought. “Congrats!”, the mayor said. We grabbed our trophy and went for a victory walk through the park and posed for lots of pictures. Before I knew it, we had to get back on the bus.

“Guys, I am so proud of you!”, said Mrs. McCauley when we were all on the bus. Everyone was all smiles and I knew that even when you start feeling down never ever give up.

***An Abandoned Flower* — 2nd Place Winner** **By Charlotte Malone**

Do you ever pay attention to what happens in the community around you? Homelessness and inhumanity to animals is now more prevalent than ever. I live in New York City where this happens so often people don’t even notice it around them. When you see New York City, it’s like a beautiful flower garden with weeds surrounding it. The beautiful city of lights is the garden, and homelessness and animal cruelty are the weeds overtaking the city. There are more weeds growing around the city than ever. I should know because I was a hunter dog left to die in the woods of Long Island who wound up in the city.

I was born on Long Island, as a hunter beagle. My pack was not treated well by the hunters. We were kept locked in cages, and only let out when it was time to hunt rabbits. My mother warned our

family not to let go of a catch. She said if we failed the hunters, they would abandon us in the woods. I couldn't imagine this. "It won't happen to me, I kept repeating in my mind." But just as my mother had warned, this tragic reality happened. It was a cold morning and the temperature had dropped well below freezing. The pack was pulled out on a hunt. There was snow all over the ground, and I was so cold I couldn't keep up with the pack. I started whimpering and lost my catch. The hunter was furious and kicked me into a bush where I laid feeling like I would die. I heard him yell, "You mutt, keep up or get lost." The pack moved on, and I fell asleep. I woke up, cold, hungry, and alone. I wandered through the woods until I smelled the aroma of food in the distance. I was desperate to eat and ran as fast as I could following the scent. It led me to a huge truck with the back door open. I jumped in and dove for the smell which turned out to be a left-over hamburger from the driver's dinner. The next thing I knew the door closed, and I was left in the dark. The truck started to move, and I began to shake and whine hoping to find a way out.

When the door finally opened, I had no idea I had traveled from Suffolk county, Long Island to Queens. I began roaming the streets searching for a place to sleep and something to eat. I saw many people sitting on the streets. They looked like they needed love and shelter just like me. I meandered by a family that was in an alley sitting on a mattress. A girl called for me to come and gently picked me up. She stared at me, and I wondered what was wrong. I looked at the mirror door across the alley and I saw myself, a sick dog with whip marks, blood on my face from the hunter's belt, and dirty matted fur. I could hardly believe it was me. At that moment I felt pain strike me all at once and I fell to the ground.

When I woke, I heard the girl arguing with what appeared to be her family. They were yelling that she couldn't keep this sick dog when they didn't even have food, or a home for themselves. I heard the words homeless, and no money, then fell back to sleep. When I roused again, I was wrapped in their only blanket, with a homemade poultice on my cuts. The girl had cleaned my wounds with napkins. Her name was Lilly. I figured out her family didn't have a home or much to offer me to eat. They lived on the mattress in the alley and were poor. The girl kept hugging me and calling me Larry. I couldn't believe my ears! I had been given a name. It sounded as if the girl had convinced her family to keep me even though I could sense the family was worried about their decision. It turns out I was very sick. I had gotten an infection from the blood of the rabbits I fetched in my hunting days. The family took me to a veterinary hospital and begged for my life. The veterinarian gave me medicine, and his workers decided to help the family. They donated money and helped them find a small apartment. Then the animal hospital hired the father to clean the examination rooms and keep them sanitary.

I finally had a loving home. My journey is proof that we may never stop the weeds of homelessness and animal cruelty from infesting our communities, but kindness and determination can save a few human and furry lives from these weeds.

***The Seahorse* — 3rd Place Winner -Tie**
By Gavin Parks

Once upon a time in the sea was a young king named Dinral who ruled the crab kingdom and protected Poseidon's trident from the terror above the sea-the Dark Phoenix. The Dark Phoenix was a flying beast of terror born from a dark past and is born time and time again and takes his true enraged form every winter but this year it was the worst.

One day in the kingdom Dinral was signing a peace treaty with the coral kingdom when all of a sudden..."ROOOAAAR" it was the Dark Phoenix taking its ultimate form. Dinral called his men to fire their crossbows at the beast, but the beast reined over their bloody ashes of his men. As the beast approached the castle, Dinral ran up to his throne room, but the beast heard the young king and shot a fireball at the stairway. Dinral was hanging by his tail to survive. He grabbed Poseidon's trident but for a moment, he thought he was safe. The Dark Phoenix shot up and grabbed Dinral. There he was hanging by the beast watching the ashes of his once beloved kingdom burn into flames. That instant he had an idea as the beast flew over the castle, he bit its leg with his teeth, and landing in his banquet hall, he ran for his life. The beast flew into the Condor Hall as Dinral made his way to the Trident he encountered the beast but barely made it. Dinral grabbed the trident and rushed out to the dungeon. There was a crossbow that was dropped by one of his men. He took the crossbow and loaded it with the trident. It was time to finish his duty.

He climbed out of the dungeon and he looked at the castle... there, the Dark Phoenix came out from the castle turning it into a burning inferno. Dinral took a deep breath. The crossbow was shaking, and he fired. The trident flew straight through the beast's head. The beast fell into the burning inferno that was once called a castle and perished.

Poseidon saw what happened, so he sent Dinral to the stars and made the Dark Phoenix nothing but a crow since crows get bad omens and are a symbol of death. After that, all was at peace once more in the ocean forever, and if you look up into the sky on a clear, clear winter evening you can see Dinral in the sky watching over his kingdom.

***The Meadow Farm* — 3rd Place Winner -Tie**
By Peter Jin

One spring day, in the village of Pastureville, some animals decided to start a farm. They were Star, a horse; Wally, a pig; Buttercup, a cow; Snowflake, a sheep; and Tweet, a pigeon.

The animals decided to buy land on the outskirts of Pastureville. They found out that they did not have enough money. So, Wally went to the Pastureville Bank to take out a loan. When the animals went to their land, they found that the buildings were run down and old. They had purchased the land without even thinking to look around the property. So, the animals decided to renovate the buildings. They completed the refurbishment and had supper.

The next day, the animals had a meeting to decide on what type of farm they wanted. Star wanted to fully dedicate the farm to wheat, but Buttercup argued that potatoes and lettuce should be planted while Wally and Snowflake desired to have the property planted with corn. After a lot of bickering, the animals decided that the land would be planted with all of the crops they wanted to grow.

They named the property “The Meadow Farm” after the large field next to the land. Then, the animals moved into the five thousand square foot farmhouse. That evening, they determined that they would sell their products at the local farmers market.

An hour before dawn the next day, all of the animals were eating breakfast. Then, they went outside and acquired large bags of seed. Star, Buttercup, and Snowflake planted seeds while Wally and Tweet repaired the farm equipment. The animals waited for the seeds to sprout.

About one and a half months later, the lettuce and corn were ready to harvest. The animals toiled every day. However, there were many squabbles about doing less work that took up precious harvest time. So, the animals decided to stop arguing and do more work each day. Next, the animals carted the produce to the farmers market and set up a stand. They called the stand “Faithful Organic Foods Market.” The lettuce and corn were sold out three days later. Then, the animals used most of the money to pay off the debt from the loan and deposited the rest in Pastureville Bank.

One week later, the potatoes were harvested. The animals gathered the potatoes quickly this time because of their experience with the lettuce and corn. They hauled the potatoes to their stand at the local farmers market and again, the produce sold out quickly. Then, the animals used most of the earned money to pay off debt and put the rest in the bank. They began to plant the lettuce and corn again. The animals worked from dawn to dusk.

A week passed and the animals found themselves planting potato seed again. They toiled every day. A few days later, Wally received a call from the Pastureville Bank. The call said that the bank was shutting down and all loans had to be paid within one day. As luck had it, they were a few thousand dollars away from paying the loan. So, they had no choice but to sell the farm. As a result, they got about five million dollars but had no farm. Then, the farm’s cost skyrocketed to ten million dollars. The animals tried to think of ways how to obtain the five million dollars needed to buy the farm back. They decided to start a company to earn the money. The animals wanted the company to be a bank. They named it the Bank of Animals and used one million dollars to buy a small tower in downtown Pastureville. At first, the bank had barely any business. But, in a month, animals were coming and going like it was the Sillon de Bretagne in France. The animals had to hire workers because of the gargantuan workload.

After one year, the animals earned about seven million dollars. They went back to the farm and tried to buy it back. However, the owner, Otter Oattie, refused. He said that he used the farm as a large source of income. The animals were very desperate to buy the farm. So, they promised Otter Oattie a job at the Bank of Animals with a high salary. He agreed to sell the farm and told the animals it would cost five million dollars, the price that he bought the farm for. The animals made Otter Oattie an accountant at their bank. Then, the animals began to plant seeds for the season’s harvest. However, the animals needed someone to run the bank. They elected Wally because of his great speaking skills. The farm was doing very well.

Ten years later, Otter Oattie was the CFO of the Bank of Animals. The Meadow Farm was doing wonderfully!

Grade 6 Short Story

The Cookie — 1st Place Winner

By Charles Williams

Josh had a cookie. It was a wonderful cookie. His friend knocked on the door. Josh was startled, and his cookie fell on the floor. Josh opened the door and his friend asked why he was sad. When Josh told them about what happened, they felt really bad!

They ran outside and brought back a magnificent looking Macadamia nut cookie. They split it in half and gave the other to Josh. He tried his best not to blush. He was so excited that he ran to his dad. He tripped and dropped the cookie. Oh boy, was he mad!

His dad laughed, but he still felt somewhat bad. He gave his son two dollars to buy another cookie. Josh wasted no time and rushed to the store. To Josh's delight, a sugar-coated replacement caught his eye. He ran so fast that the cashier thought he was about to fly! He snatched up the cookie and threw his money at the cashier. He took a bite, and the other half fell on the floor!

Just as Josh was about to accept defeat, the manager came in and watched him drop to his feet. He chuckled and let Josh pick out a new cookie. This time, he walked rather carefully. When he saw the selection, his mouth watered. He decided he wanted one that was chocolate-covered. Just as he exited the store, he was overpowered by a Dalmatian!

Josh glared at the cruel animal with rage and confusion. It stared back with a sinister look in its eyes. The dog sprinted toward its owner with a smile on its face. Josh still glared with much distaste! The owner apologized and gave him some spare change. Poor Josh walked back inside, prepared for the worst. He slid under a table and grabbed a frosted cookie. He lunged toward the cashier, hurled the money at them, and darted toward the exit. To top it all off, he did a front-flip over a puddle of water. Luck still wasn't on his side. No matter how much maneuvering and coordination, bitter defeat was inevitable. A truck sped through a large puddle of muddy water, and soaked Josh from head to toe!

One of his neighbors saw what had happened. They explained to Josh how their tire had been flattened. They offered to buy him a new cookie if he could pump up their tire. Josh ripped the tire off of the car and thrust himself toward the nearby auto shop. He told the owner about the other five cookies that had met their demise. They gave him a free tire, much to his surprise! Josh hurled the tire at his neighbor, and they attached it to their car. Like they had promised, the neighbor asked Josh what kind of cookie he wanted and went into the store. They brought back a peanut-butter cookie with marshmallows and milk-chocolate frosting. They wrapped it in a plastic bag. Josh ran home, took a shower, and claimed his reward. Josh was not going to lose another cookie to the cruel world he lived in. He scurried across the road; the bag buried deep within his pocket. He did a barrel roll past a beady-eyed little squirrel. The adorable animal couldn't possibly cause the death of yet another delicious cookie. Josh and the evil little beast exchanged eye contact for what felt like an eternity. He finally concluded that the squirrel meant no harm and sprinted toward his house. Josh was blind-sided and bitten by a small animal! Sound familiar?

Josh checked his pocket, and desperately searched for the bag. The unworldly pain he had felt was unbearable! He watched as the squirrel ran off into the distance with his tasty treat. At that moment, everything finally made sense. Josh didn't rush over to the store this time. He walked.

When he got to the store, he bought a plain cookie with the change he had left. Nothing attacked him, it didn't fall. He enjoyed his cookie, as the manager smiled. When he arrived home, he told his parents and friends about his ridiculous adventure. No one believed him. And nobody had to.

The Lost Princess— 2nd Place Winner
By Sydney Todorov

My mom always told me I was adopted and that I looked so pretty I could be a princess. I believed her, secretly. I would always go to school and look at the lost princess' twin brother. He seemed so familiar after spying on him for so long. Archard, the prince, had the dark green and black mark on his left hand, symbolizing dark magic, and the beautiful yellow mark on his right hand symbolizing bright magic. Boring old me simply had a red mark. That meant I could only teleport 15 meters away and lift objects that were under 100 pounds. Somehow, I didn't care because I hadn't even learned how to use my magic.

In our kingdom every thousand years the queen and the king would have twins, a girl and a boy. The girl and the boy would become the most powerful in the galaxy; they could do anything. The young prince that went to school with me was that boy. Tragically his twin sister was stolen.

Sometimes I fell ill, so ill I would have strange hallucinations. I started having dreams of being crowned a princess, walking down a marvelous hallway all decorated with rich colors and flowers. One day I went to school and gathered enough courage to ask Archard if he thought his sister was still alive. As I said that, I saw a spell conjure up and his eyes glowed black. The teacher had to calm him down. When Archard uses dark magic for too long, he could get sucked in and destroy the place. I was just quiet, observing the mess I made. I really didn't care. All I wanted to do was learn what Archard knew about his sister. I guess I needed to practice using my magic sooner or later, or I could get hurt asking such direct questions.

Weeks later I heard my mother reading an official letter from the medical care in the kingdom. It warned that if you knew anybody that was sick recently, you should immediately bring them to the hospital. I felt scared. I had been sick so often in the past few months, I knew there was no escape. My mom went in my room, not knowing that I was eavesdropping, and told me all about the letter. I just followed along, pretending I had never heard of this before. She told me to get ready to leave.

When we went to the medical building and registered, I was taken away from my mother. They put something on my hands and I couldn't move them. Then the word came to me, handcuffs! I knew I had heard of this before, but I didn't know from where. They ushered me into a small room and poked me with a needle; I could see my blood draining in a tube. Then I passed out. Everything was dark. I could feel the Queen, holding me as they examined if I was healthy. I was then brought to a beautiful room embellished with gold and silver. The Queen said, "Phoenix Andrea Deyes." It was my name. The memory changed to a different time. I was being brought to a grand ceremony room dressed in an exquisite flowery gown. The whole kingdom was there, that is how big the room was. They clapped for me when I received the diamond tiara and was crowned princess of Ashlabad. I was a tiny child. I woke up all confused, lying constrained to the bed. The dream was still vivid in my mind. I knew I could use my powers to teleport, but I didn't know how to use them. I just waited.

When finally, I was discharged, nobody said anything. We went back home silently. I felt the hole in my arm where they stuck the thick needle. I did not know what to think, but I was worried and I could see my mother was very anxious too.

The next day when I walked through the door in school, Archard threw a spell at me as a good morning. I wasn't knocked out, but I was hurting. Confused, I dashed home, but nobody was there. I ran into the forest, instinctively looking for a safe place to hide. I did not get anywhere. I just succumbed behind a big tree and cried pitifully. It was too much to process. My mind was hurting and the tears just kept running down. I knew now was the time I had to learn to use my powers to protect myself. I slowly remembered what the teacher taught us. Think of something you love to activate. I tried so hard that I passed out. In my unconsciousness a magical being told me I needed to think of the correct thing to activate. When I woke up, I tried to come up with all the different things I like: Flowers, Stars, Water, Home... Myself! That had to work. It did! The next thing I knew I was lifting fallen trees. My magic, however, wasn't red like it was supposed to be, it was yellow. It had to be red because my mark was red. That was impossible! I decided to rest. The next morning, I woke up and tried to use my magic to teleport. I teleported to a nearby tree and it worked! I looked down at my hands and saw that my mark wasn't red; it was black and green on one hand and on the other hand yellow! It was the exact mark of the royal family. I couldn't believe it, *I was royal!* There was a stream of water nearby. I wanted to put it to the test. I tried to control the water, which was not one of my normal abilities. I moved it around in a swirling motion in the air, then I froze it. It was an amazing feeling. Exhilarated, I walked through the forest touching it with my magic.

I decided to go to the royal palace. I went there invisible and entered by walking through the door. I really loved that power; I felt like a ghost. As I was walking around the hallways, I saw Archard and almost hid. Then I remembered I was invisible. Archard, though, was staring in my direction. He said, "How did you get in?" I stood there stunned. How could he see me? He ran to me and grabbed my hands. The royal marks were there clearly visible. Archard said, "Sister?" I didn't know what to say. I just stood there filled with emotions. Brother?

***The Book of Code* — 3rd Place Winner** **By Tyler Netting**

Izzy woke up in a world of paper and lead. "Where am I?" she wondered. Just then a stack of paper walked toward her. "I am your last homework assignment!" Bzzzz,Bzzzz,Bzzzz, the school bell jostled her awake! Yes! she thought, time for computer coding, her favorite class! Together with her friend Mark they could code anything! They were currently trying to program a new game, but it was hard. Mark was shy, smart, and quiet- unlike many other boys who were into sports, he loved to code! He and Izzy made an awesome team because of their similar interests. Computer class flew by and soon it was time to go home. She quickly finished her homework and went to her room to code. Her parents allowed her to code as long as her grades were steady. She always turned to Mark when she was lost. She also had enough to do at home because the game they were working on was very expansive, as it was an rpg. She also loved going to the park to play with her dog Coco. The park was the center of the town, but there were talks of tearing it down, which made Izzy very uncomfortable and mad because the park was where her parents got married.

The next day there was chatter about a coding game tournament! Apparently two people would code a game and two would play it. The games were judged on difficulty, creativity, and imagination. The prize was unknown, but Izzy didn't care because a decision had been made that if in the next month \$10,000 were not raised, the park would be destroyed and turned into a hotel! She finished school to storm home and go up to her bed and cry into her pillow, but then she got a text saying, "Don't give up, learned that prize for tournament is 11,000 dollars! I am talking to the school and since everybody loves the park, we are having computer all day. We are working overtime to solve the problem!" She immediately texted back with "Great, I'll work on the game, you get the two best gamers to come and test the game!" That night Izzy dreamed of codes and about saving the park and what a hero she could be!

The next day Izzy, Mark, Nathan, and Sally were put into a separate room so they could code and play in quiet. The testers had some good ideas and with their feedback, they tweaked the game bit by bit until the school day was over and they all went home where the code people coded and the gamers honed their gaming skills. That night Izzy had a dream about one line of code, and when she woke up and put that code in the game, suddenly some of the bugs were instantly fixed. Proud of fixing them, she didn't think of her odd dream; she just told Mark, Nathan, and Sally about it. They shrugged it off as a lucky dream, that's all. Izzy thought it was more than that, but she didn't want to seem weird. The next night she had another dream about coding and she put in the code the next day. When she walked into the room where the gamers and coders usually met, nobody was in there. She thought they were late, and so she booted up her laptop. As she did this, there was a message saying "initiate code"; she closed it out, but then, it popped up. She finally clicked *yes* and then she woke up in a world of code! She was at a loss for words but then she saw everyone had already been in the game! They waved her over and told her what she had put in the game. She told them about her dream and about thinking it was a good line of code. They looked taller and older, so she asked, "How long have you been in here?"

They responded with, "about a year."

She said, "But you were here yesterday!"

They shrugged and said, "Guess time flies a lot faster in the game."

Izzy asked, "How do we get out?"

And they said, "You have to beat the game!"

Izzy sighed; she knew that there were 100 unique levels with lots of weapons ranging from common to godly to collect and mobs to kill each with 20 to 100,000 health. She sighed and said, "How many have you beaten?" They said they had beaten 10/100 levels. It was a start, although a small one. She asked what weapons they had and learned they only had a laser blaster (rare 10 damage per shot) and three machine guns (common 3 damage per shot), the worst weapons in the game. She took a machine gun and helped them beat level 11. They got a flamethrower (rare 5 damage per second and a laser shotgun with rare 10 damage per blast) They started the journey to the next level, a pirate level in which you had to defend a ship from pirates and afterward they unlocked a special skill *cannonball barrage*, an ability that let them easily pass the next five levels. The next level was a *Boss Fight* against a giant crocodile in the sewers. It had only one weak point that you had to hit. The reward was a legendary rocket launcher (100 damage per blast). They barely defeated the boss and moved on to level 19 now with Izzy destroying everything in sight with the rocket launcher and Mark shot gunning anything that survived. They got an automatic sniper (epic 30 damage per blast) and a grenade launcher

(very rare 15 damage per grenade with area damage). They all annihilated a few levels until they got to level 30, which was another boss fight, this time for a laser Gatling gun (godly 10 damage per blast, extremely fast fire rate). Again, they beat the boss and now they all had very good weapons. They all admitted they were a little homesick. They took a special challenge and all gained an extra life (hmm... wonder if they will use that?) They destroyed a military base and got another special ability *Burt blast* which sends a giant laser blast at an enemy. They also started getting trinkets with special abilities. Izzy had a teleportation amulet (legendary) allowing her to teleport. Mark had a flash fire amulet (very rare) which temporarily let the person wearing it fire 10 shots at once. Sally had a boom amulet (rare) which allowed her to create an explosion that did 10 damage to all enemies near her, and finally Nathan had an invincibility amulet (godly), which allowed the owner to become invincible for 10 seconds. They got to level 50 and unlocked classes. Nathan was a tank x3 health, Izzy was a ranger giving her ranged weapons x2 damage, Sally was a demolitionist giving all explosive weapons and traits x4 damage, and Mark was a forest elf (special class) giving bows x10 damage. They beat the next few levels and they all had godly weapons. Sally had the bazooka (1200 damage per blast), Nathan had a laser sword (1000 damage per slice), Mark had a Laser bow (1000 damage an arrow), and Izzy had the laser Gatling gun. They reached level 100 and an epic battle followed. The boss was a really tough robot and could only be hit in one spot and had two phases. Mark and Sally worked together shooting explosive arrows that were doing lots of damage and Izzy was teleporting Nathan up close to chop the boss with his laser sword. They beat the boss, but then something unexpected happened! The boss blew up and only Izzy and Nathan survived the blast; they waited, but Sally and Mark didn't come back. They saw them respawn on the other side of the level; they could not reach them. Then they were teleported out into the real world and decided to take out that line of code. Nathan said, "What happened?" and Izzy replied with, "I have no idea!" They wondered what was happening and were planning to go back in when they realized that they would need a plan; they hoped that the others were okay. TO BE CONTINUED....

Grade 7 Short Story

***Earn, Don't Yearn* — 1st Place Winner
By Landon Schul**

"But, but sir, I'm only a little goblin boy. I have nothing, not even a family." I am of course lying about this, "You have to let me have it, it's for my food." It is really so I can obtain a new dagger, "It will get me so many loaves of bread and I will be fed for weeks." I plead hopefully. I want his beautiful watch, but he just won't let me have it.

"No, you can't have it. If you keep this up, I will have to call over the guards," The middle-aged man mumbles.

"And that's my cue to skedaddle," I joked, getting up off my knees and hastily scurrying up and over the fence. I wiped my brow with relief that he didn't hold me there until the guards arrived. You see, I am a little goblin boy. We as a race are not particularly liked in these parts of the city. I am also a little thief and anyone who looks at me could tell right away. I should probably work on appearing less like a thief and more like a normal commoner.

I am currently trying to steal enough money or goods to purchase or trade for an elven blade of wood and stone. This type of blade is typically crafted by The Great Elven Ones. I am referring to the elders of Yangtinheir, who are not that great in my opinion. I do have to admit their daggers are top of the line. Even better than the dwarven metal daggers. This dagger is my key into adventuring. Every great thief's main weapon is always a top of the line dagger. That is what they are known for. This is why I need this dagger. Anyway, I am just trying to go around and procure the means of payment by obtaining small possessions that will eventually add up to the price of the dagger. This way of making money is not really working out for me, so I think if I pull off one big heist, I will be better off.

It is in my nature to seek the thrill. Therefore, I can't help but to obsess over the act of the heist, more so than what I would actually be stealing. I have been thinking for a while about this big heist, and I can't think of what I will steal. I was originally thinking of robbing the most well-known tavern, but then I remembered that they don't close at night, so that isn't an option. Another place I thought of was the armory because the gladiators will buy all of the weapons there for a great deal of gold. However, the guards there will have various weapons at their disposal. The final option is the art gallery. The guards, who are probably not trained well, will not be heavily armed, the art will sell for piles of gold, and they do actually close at night.

As I walk all the way back to my house, I brainstorm all of the ways that I could steal from the gallery. As I pass an alley where I am often lucky to catch rats, I see a young Tabaxi, which are cat like humanoids, trying to catch a rat by the tail. She must have learned this way of catching from her mother. In a quest to please her teacher she may impress, but not succeed.

I stride over to her and helpfully suggest, "You should try to catch them in a cleverer way. Like this." I pull out a piece of cheese from my pocket and fashion a sort of deadfall trap from a loose cobble stone and a metal rod I gather from the close by areas of the alley. We step back and wait for a minute and out of a hole under the foundation of an inn comes a fat, juicy rat. It crawls over toward the deadfall trap and nibbles on the bait. Snap! The trap falls, trapping the rat and crushing its tiny body. The tabaxi purrs and yelps in excitement for seeing that glorious event. She rips the rat out from under the rock and takes a huge bite. Crack! The bones are cracking in her mouth as she chews on the crushed body.

"Take care!" I proudly holler back at her. If only my success in the art gallery is equal to that in the alley. I continue down the street a few blocks and I get to my humble home. I greet my mother, my father and my little sister, Christene. We share a meager dinner and I go to bed early, for I have to stay up all night tomorrow. I have dreams of slaying dragons, evil wizards, and other monstrosities with the great dagger I yearn for.

The next morning, I am anxious for the heist and consumed with planning. I decide to go to the art gallery today and sketch the building's layout.

I am dancing wondrously around this beautiful structure when I spot the sign I am looking for. A great big sign that reads, "Marvels." This sign is my way to the dagger. I quickly sketch the quickest way, which is by vaulting through the window near the table of the drooping smiles and rush out of there to go and catch lunch before my mother stops cooking. Meals are a luxury these days. I must get what I can. I finally get back to the house at about mid sun and I quickly munch on my lunch, so I can get back outside to play adventurers with my friend, Rose, who is a paladin in training. We play for a while doing quests we get from the blacksmith and the butchers. We play until the sun is about to set, and we run back toward our houses, so we can get back in time for dinner.

It is now about midnight and I am about to begin my heist. First, I quietly climb out of my bedroom window, so as not to wake my parents. Then I start off for the gallery. After I approach the outside of the building, I check over both my shoulders and head for the far side of the building. Once I approach the side window near The Table of Drooping Smiles, I climb up and vault through it. When I am finally inside, I quickly dash to a nearby dark corner and survey the area for guards. There are surprisingly none watching the entrance. I stealthily peek inside the area to check for more. I see one of the guards staring blankly at a mosaic of different shapes and colors. He looks like he's in a trance. I half stumble, half stealth my way over to a wall of a few small, but well-known paintings.

I think in my head, "These will be easy to carry in my bag and sell for loads." I then begin to carefully grab them from off the wall and stuff them into my little back sack.

"Stop that?" A voice calls out from the other side of the room. It is a clear man's voice, but I cannot pinpoint the age.

I quickly lunge backwards and blurt in a gasp, "Who said that?" I then hear a pretty audible snap and an elven man about the age of my father, steps out from under a shadowy cloak.

"It was I, young one. Now, what could you be wanting all of them for?" He asks clearly trying to sound wiser.

"Uh... No reason, no reason at all... ok, I want to buy a dagger, but nobody will hire a goblin." I was lying about nobody hiring me, I just don't like to work. Plus, it would take ages to get the gold for the dagger by working.

"Now, what dagger would cost the price of all those paintings?" He asks.

"An elven dagger of wood and stone." I reply, my shoulders sagging in defeat.

He then asks, "Ah, the ones of Yangtinheir, right?"

"Yes, I want to be able to train and use a great dagger. I need to train for adventuring one day. Skill doesn't come easy, you know?" I tell him honestly.

"You're right about that one, my friend," he admits in a friendly way, "You know that I had to work hard and study to learn all these spells?" He then makes a flame appear in his hand in a magical manner.

"Wow, a real wizard!" I say in awe, staring at the flame.

He replies, "Not quite, but I see you have an interest in magic. If you put those back and you don't steal ever again, I will teach you magic and you can become an actual adventurer that will use your magic for good. Then once you get paid for all your good deeds, you can buy the things you want with that gold. Doesn't that sound lovely?"

"You would do that?"

"Sure, why not?"

I quickly put the paintings back on the shelf and ask, "When can we start?"

"Wow, you're excited. You know how you were really yearning for that dagger?"

"Uh huh." I answer, embarrassed, that he knows my truth.

"Well you could have earned that dagger instead of stealing for it."

"Uh huh."

"Just remember. Earn don't yearn. How about we start tomorrow?"

My eyes light up as I hear those glorious words. "Tomorrow it is." I reply with a passion and a burn in my heart.

***Seeing Eye to Ear* — 2nd Place Winner**
By Ava Baer

The first day of school. Well, it wasn't the other kids' first day, just mine. I had to transfer because there wasn't a special education teacher at my old school. I have a little... problem with reading. That's why I love art so much. But my mom picked this school because there was another kid with special needs like me. I didn't know what her name was or what she had issues with, just that she was in my class.

I walked below the 16-foot-tall entrance to the school courtyard. Me and my adork-able schoolgirl clothes searched helplessly around for a single soul to talk to who wasn't already in their clique. I saw a cliché group of athletic boys bullying a brown-haired girl in a white sundress with purple flowers on it. The girl was backed up against a tree while some guy was pulling her glasses off her face. He went in front of her to say something, and it looked like he enunciated the words as if she couldn't understand him. Did she speak a different language?

The bully made threatening movements with his fist toward her. As soon as he did that, I ran over to the tree they were standing around.

With anger in my face, I yelled, "Hey, leave her alone, you jerk!"

He turned his head to me with a face of confusion. "Not one moron like you has ever bucked up to me like that. And was that the best you could come up with?"

I suddenly knew I made the wrong choice immediately after I said that. "Never mind. Just... leave her alone." I reached out my hand to the brunette to symbolize to her to follow me.

She grabbed my hand and at that we started to stumble away from the jocks after I grabbed her glasses from the bully's sweaty hand. The bell rang to start school; the girl and I walked into the entrance. I saw her touch her lips with the tips of her fingers, then put her palm flat, facing upward. I looked at her with a face of confusion. She was strangely silent.

"Hey, I'm Cedar Polak. And you are?" I was trying to be kind and comforting to her, and I was also trying to make a new friend. Friends were always sparse for me.

There was no answer.

I waited for her to say something, or at least acknowledge that I existed, but she never did. I tapped her shoulder to try to get her attention. Then, she finally looked at me.

Her face looked embarrassed, as she could see that I wanted to get her attention. A voice with not much enunciation started to talk. I could sort of make out what she was saying. "Hi, I'm Jackie Burlew." I didn't make fun of her for the way she talked, but I was puzzled. I think she could see that, though.

Without speaking, she pointed to her ear and made an 'x' with her arms.

"Oh, I understand. You're deaf," I realized. I knew she couldn't hear me; I was talking to myself.

Jackie then pointed to a room off to the side of the hallway as we tried to shuffle through all the other students that were bigger than us. She started toward the door and I felt the urge to follow her, I had the need to protect her from anyone else. But while we were walking toward the door, I saw the sign to the side of it. *Special Education*. Oh, no. That was my classroom. I suddenly stopped, art book in hand. What would the teacher think of me? I was in 9th grade and I still couldn't read properly.

Jackie's hand hovered over the doorknob as she looked at me. She then backtracked her steps and grabbed my hand. She looked into my eyes and nodded her head to tell me that it would be okay. Everything would be fine.

She pulled me into our room and let me pick which seat I wanted to sit in. The chairs were blue with wheels on the bottom. Jackie sat in the chair directly next to me. As soon as she sat, she got out a high-quality lead pencil and started scribbling. I guess she couldn't really talk, so she was used to writing notes instead. My guess was that she also had to have nice pencils if she was writing so much.

When Jackie was done writing, she slid the piece of paper over to me. My hands felt sweaty and the collar of my shirt felt tighter. I slowly lowered my finger to the first word. It followed my eyes as I tried to read.

The letters swiveled around on the page. Lowercase 'A's, 'E's, and 'Y's turned upside down, 'W's looked like 'M's and all the words looked shaded or shadowed. On some letters, the sides were missing. This is what everything that I read looked like. I could make out a couple of the words. *In...class?* Those letters were always easy because they sort of looked the same backwards. *In and class.* What were they supposed to mean?

My eyebrows were fixed with frustration over my eyes. Jackie looked at me with a face of confusion. She looked me right in the eyes and made fists with her hands, then pushed them down. She then pointed at me, then flattened out her left hand and pointed her two first fingers of her right hand toward it. She had signed, 'can you read,' but I didn't know that at the time.

"What?" I asked as I tilted my head. Just then a heavy-set woman with dark brown skin entered the room. She had reading glasses and wore a pink skirt and navy-blue jacket. She also had short, braided hair tied into a bun. Jackie looked at the woman and smiled. She then placed her fingers on her lips again and placed the back of her hand on the palm of her other hand, then put her left arm across her chest and brought up her right hand, her palms facing inward. As Jackie did this, she said in her non-enunciated voice, "Good, Morning!"

The woman then signed the same thing back to her. "Oh, our new student, Cedar. I'm Miss Davis." The teacher signed while she spoke. Miss Davis wanted to include Jackie in the conversation a little.

Miss Davis then sat down in a chair on the opposite side of the table. She got out some flash cards with words on them and told me to read them out loud. Jackie was to sign the words as I read them, I guess of a means of practicing sign language.

She put up the first flash card. "Uh, b-basket," I struggled to say. Jackie signed the word with her hands.

There were way more cards, but I didn't really pay attention to the exercises we did. Jackie seemed so lonely, and I knew that she could use a friend. But I couldn't read or use sign language. She could hardly talk. How could we be friends if we couldn't even communicate?

At the end of the class period, I meet with my teacher. "Miss Davis?" She turned around to look at me.

"Yes?" She had a sentimental look in her eye.

"I know you're very busy, but could you teach me sign language after school for a while? I would do it online, but I can't read the screen. I really want to be friends with Jackie, but I can't figure out how to, you know, communicate with her."

Miss Davis smiled at me. "I'll see you after school."

That day after school, and every other day for a few months, Miss Davis taught me sign language. Usually, I would've given up on trying, because it was too hard. But my mind was set on learning this language. Jackie was the only other person I knew who understood what it was like to have a disability. She knew what it was like to be laughed at because of something that she had no control over. To look at a book and not know the words it was saying. Or, in her case, not being able to hear someone talk. I could only wonder what it was like to know people were talking about you, right in front of your face, and not know what they were saying, or how mean they were being. I had never wanted someone to be my friend and share and help me through my troubles as much as her.

One day, as I was walking home, I saw Jackie reading a book. I ran up to her quietly and tapped her shoulder. She meekly smiled at me and sort of saluted to me, with her palm facing outward, as a means of saying hello in sign language. That was the first thing I had learned. I did the hello sign back to her. Then, I put out two fingers and shook them in between the two of us, made one of my fingers into a hook and shook it up and down, and made a hook with a finger with my other hand and put the two hooks together, like a promise. I had said, 'we should be friends' in sign language.

Then, she looked at me and smiled the biggest smile I had ever seen anyone do. I knew then that we would be friends for a *very* long time.

***Evelyn's Beginning* — 3rd Place Winner** **By Sierra Merritt**

"Evelyn!" Pixie called, "Get up!" Next thing I know, I'm getting dragged out of bed. "Come on!" she called again, "Get up already."

"I'm coming, I'm coming," I groaned as I sat up. I could already tell this wasn't going to be a good day.

"Breakfast is almost ready!" Pixie called from downstairs. I stood up and gave my wings a shake.

"That's a bit better," I said to myself. I headed downstairs; it almost seemed as if Mom was still here. She had left on an expedition to figure out what the humans were doing. Mom never came back, along with the other fairies.

"Hello! Are you still on Earth, Evelyn?" Pixie asked.

Pixie is my older sister. She's looked out for me since Mom didn't come back and when Dad died of heartbreak. It still feels like they're here. Sometimes I hope that my Mom will wake me up, but that happened when I was 10. I'm 15 now and I've learned that I need to move on.

"Hey, Pixie," I asked, "can I go outside?"

"To do what? Say hi to the little creatures?" She teased.

"Whatever," I said.

"Hey! Get some breakfast, Evelyn," Pixie said.

"Oh, alright. I'll get some breakfast if it makes you be quiet," I said playfully. I looked down to my plate. "Just great," I thought, "more salad." Once I was done, I headed outside.

“Isn’t it beautiful outside today, Evelyn?” a familiar voice called.

“You can come out, Cameron,” I said. He walked, well more like strutted proudly, over to me. “What do you want to do today?” I asked.

“Oh, well, I thought we could go down to the river... only if you want to,” he inquired shyly. It seemed as if he couldn’t keep his eyes from looking at the ground. He suddenly appeared small and weak. So, we started walking to the river.

“Come on, Cam! Tell me already!” I pleaded.

“No!” Cameron said. “Not yet.”

“There is something you aren’t telling me, and I want to know what it is!” I exclaimed.

“That’s the whole reason it’s called a surprise!” he said.

“I know, I know,” I said. I still couldn’t understand why, there were no hints at all and normally with Cameron, there is.

“Surprise!” Cam said. “I hope you like it...”

“Like it, I love it!” I exclaimed. It was a new hammock made of cat tail reeds. I heard a rustle in the bushes, “I’ll be back in a second, Cam.”

I walked over to the bush and a large man with a thick beard popped from behind the bush. He was muscular in ragged clothes. The man was also missing a few teeth, showing he had been in many fights. He looked down at me with a toothless smile, “I have orders to take you to the Prince, so don’t make this difficult.” He got a little closer holding out a bag. Then another man stepped out from a bush. He was covered in gemstones and silver.

I screamed. I really didn’t want to go with them. “Cam! Cam! Please help me, please!”

I saw Cam stop what he was doing and burst out running. “Get your hands off her!” he said sternly.

“Or what?” the second man asked, “You going to hurt me, little boy? I’m Louis, by the way in case you were wondering.” Cameron wielded a dagger and Louis took out a sword, encrusted with jewels. Then I understood. This wasn’t just some Louis: it was Prince Louis!

“Cam, no!” I screamed, “You won’t beat him. It’s Prince Louis and if you did, you would be hanged.”

“The girl is right. You wouldn’t beat me,” Louis retorted.

Cam set his dagger back, “Very well, but I come with you.”

“Cam,” I protested, “You are putting yourself in danger. Don’t do this. Please. We don’t know what they will do to us.”

“No,” he said, “I’m coming with you.” Cam took a step forward and took my hand in his. “No matter where you go, I will be with you.”

“Come on, love birds! Let’s get a move on,” Louis said, “Oh, and you are dismissed,” he said, towards the toothy man. The man dropped the bag with a frown and walked away.

“Let’s go,” Cam said quietly. I still held his hand, only because I was scared out of my mind.

“Cam,” I asked, “Why are you coming with me?”

“I’m coming with you because, well, I want to keep you safe,” he said, “I’m your friend. I wanted to protect you. So, I took classes to learn how to defend others. I knew from the start this day would come. I had just hoped it wouldn’t come so soon.”

All I could do was hold his hand tighter because I was afraid that if I said something, Louis would chop my head off here. “We’re here,” Louis called from ahead, “I’ll take you to a room and you will stay there for the night.”

As soon as he showed us to a room, I collapsed on the bed. Cameron sat in a chair by the bed. “Do you want to sleep?” I asked.

“To be honest, I don’t normally sleep,” he said.

“Oh,” I said, “I’ll be okay tonight. Get some sleep.”

“Alright,” he said, sleepily, “Good night.”

I fell asleep. Not soon after I fell asleep, I heard voices outside the door. I looked up and Cameron was fast asleep. Careful not to disturb him, I got out of bed.

“We must not disturb them, Sire. It is possible that the boy could wake up. I’ve heard he trained and was the best in his class,” said an unfamiliar voice.

“I know it’s risky, but I need her so I can test my theories and experiments,” Louis said.

They started walking down the hall towards the room I was in. I jumped up and speed walked to Cameron. “Cam, Cam,” I said quietly, “You need to get up, someone’s coming to kill me!” At that he jumped up ready and alert.

“Stay behind me,” he said sternly, “You must jump through the window at the last moment.”

“Cam, please let me help you. We can ambush them and not risk our lives, or we could leave now,” I suggested, “Please.” I walked over and took his hand in mine.

“You can stay, but if I say go it means go,” Cam said.

“Thank you,” I said. He handed me a sword.

“In case you can’t get out,” he said.

“Quick,” I said quietly, “They’re coming.” He jumped up on top of the bed and I sat on the chandelier. My wings flared, ready for the jump.

“We just need to drain a little bit, not everything,” the voice was closer now, and I knew who it was.

“Cam, we need to go, now,” I said, “It’s, it’s my mom.” Even I was shocked. Cameron wasn’t paying attention. I gathered all my strength and lifted him up with my powers. “I’m sorry, Cam, but this fight isn’t for you,” then I threw him out the window. I watched him fall. I really was sorry. I got down from the chandelier.

“She’s in here,” Louis said, “Alive and well.” The door opened slowly.

“Evelyn,” my mom said, I could already tell she was faking it, “My baby, you grew right up.” She came closer as though to give me a hug.

“No,” I said, standing my ground; it was a good thing Cam taught me some moves, I unsheathed my sword.

“Evelyn, your mother doesn’t wish to hurt you,” Louis said.

“Only to drain my essence. Mom, you never spent any time with me as a kid, and I always thought it was because you didn’t want me because of my powers. I hated that!” I exclaimed as I threw myself at her. She gasped.

“Ah!” she screamed, surprised that I had come at her.

I got in my ready position and so did she. Cling! Clang!

“Why do you want to fight?” she asked, dodging my attacks, “I thought you would be happy to see me.”

“Never, I soon realized you abandoned me!” I said angrily. I jumped up into the air. I landed back on the chandelier using my wings to steady me. I stood up and looked down at my mom, “I knew you never loved me, and I always hoped you would come around. You never did, and I’m not sorry for what I will do to you.” I lifted her with my powers, and she struggled. Then, from the beautiful peach skin she became whiter than snow.

“Agh!” she cried, clearly in pain, “Evelyn, I’m sorry, I’m sorry. I only left you because of the expedition. I was badly hurt, so I came here. I stayed too long and I became one of them. Please, Evelyn, please.”

“You came back with no notice and didn’t say anything to me or Pixie,” I spat back at her.

“Pixie didn’t tell you, did she?” Louis said, “Your mother tried desperately to reach you, but Pixie held her back. Your sister is the one who hurt you, telling you to move on. To forget your past.”

“Pixie would never do that,” I said, then dropped my mom, “Never.” I kept telling myself that.

“No!” I cried out in anguish. In order to keep my secret, I wiped my mother’s and Louis’ memory of me and Cameron. Then I left. I caught up with Cam and we raced home. Although the question is, will we be safe?

Grade 8 Short Story

***Our Cat* — 1st Place Winner**

By Ella Vilmar

Nobody living on the small street knew where she came from, and to most, it seemed as if she had always been there. As if there had never been a time when a little brown and white spotted cat had not greeted them each day on their way to work or sat with them on the porch on late summer nights. As if once the last shingle was nailed into place, and the tired construction workers stood observing the neighborhood they had built, a little cat had strolled in, hopped onto the short stone wall that separated one house from another, and made herself right at home. Known that it was her home. And who knows? Maybe it did happen that way. Who knows?

Whether she was there from the beginning or just happened to see the little street and chose it as her home, the cat was there, year after year. She was a constant in the lives of each and every person living there. She was a friend to all, the small children who would pull her tail if she wasn’t careful, the old couple who sat on their porch every afternoon and calmly stroked her back, the business men and women who only had time to ruffle her ears on their way to work every now and again, but loved her all the same. She was what made the street more than just a string of houses. She made it a home.

“Home.” That’s a funny word. Almost everyone who passed through, whether visiting relatives or hanging out with friends, had said to one resident or another, “Someone needs to give that cat a home. She can’t just live out on the streets like this!”

To which the people responded, “She is home. This is exactly where she belongs.” And lucky for them, the cat seemed to think so, too.

Now, remember when I said no one knew how long she had been there? Well, this is because it had been a very long time. Years and years. And cats don't live all that long. The people knew this, and they knew that someday they would have to say goodbye, but they pushed the thought out of their minds as long as they could, for it was too horrible to even think about. Slowly, though, it got harder and harder to deny. The cat was old, she was getting slow. She would no longer play with the smaller kids, just sit and watch them contentedly from atop the stone wall built so many years ago.

Things like this started happening more and more, and the people watched and worried, but knew there was nothing they could do. So, they tried to make the end of her life as nice as possible. And when she eventually became too tired to raise herself out of the bed someone had made in the bushes, she instead waited for them to come to her, and come they did. One by one they all came, each saying farewell in their own way. Some had sweet goodbyes and remembrances, spoken on the verge of tears. Some only had tears, tears that dripped down their faces from a seemingly endless well of sorrow. Some had no tears or words at all, which is the way it is sometimes, just gentle hands to scratch her under the chin one last time. The cat appreciated them all, no matter what their goodbyes were like. She cherished her last moments with the people she had loved and watched over her entire life.

She waited, holding on for them, until each felt like they were ready to say goodbye, and once the last person wished her well in whatever would come next for her, she knew she could finally let go.

She died alone that night, nestled in the blanket that had been her bed for so many years, but she wasn't lonely. As she drifted off for the last time, she felt the love of everyone on her tiny street. The happy days, the sad ones, each and every gentle goodbye. She held it close and sent out a final goodbye of her own, to all who had known her and made her life as amazing as she had known they would, on the first day she had leapt onto that stone wall.

When they found her the next morning, they were stunned. They knew it was coming, they thought they were ready, but thinking it and experiencing it were as different as the sun and the moon when it came to things like death. They solemnly picked her up, crying all the more at her cold, stiff frame, once so warm and alive, and put her in a box with the blanket she had slept in. They buried her under the tallest tree in the neighborhood and placed a painted stone on top of the small mound of earth.

It felt like the end as the last shovel of earth was tossed over the cardboard coffin, the last flower fell among the haphazard pile already adorning the small grave. And as the last person got up and slowly made their way home, they all wondered what they would ever do without her. She was the heart of the neighborhood. But it was for that same reason that they knew it wasn't the end. So, as the last tears fell, wet cheeks twisted into smiles. "She's our cat," they told each other, "Nothing can change that. And we'll hold her in our hearts forever." With those words, they knew they could go on.

***Motta Motta*— 2nd Place Winner**
By Abbi Weeks

Outside the walls you would find very little, for no man who wandered past the locked and guarded gate could survive to tell the tale. At least, that was what they had been told for as long as anyone could remember.

Mordechai sat back on the flat, pillow-less mattress that he had claimed as his own, finding solidarity in the familiar texture every night. He just had to disregard the heavy creaking if he leaned too far left, or the persistent grumbles of the young man who slept in the bunk above. He occupied himself by tossing a stone up, letting it fall, and catching it close to his chest, then repeating like a broken record. It would occasionally hit the head of the dusty bunk, shaking the rotting wood. His face was contorted into a starry-eyed gaze, the remnants of bruises still lingered, making a pattern on his tanned skin. Although, he still glistened with a sunny disposition that anybody could recognize him from.

A young woman wearing an ambitious smile ambled towards the younger boy, tightly holding a piece of bread. You could see her bony wrists from under the long-sleeved uniform shirt, poking out like tiny, pale daggers. The blotchy wash of her skin made sharp contrast against her unkempt, curly hair. She whistled to force Mordechai out of his rock-induced trance and coming up he nailed his forehead on the top bunk.

“Naomi!” Mordechai whined, holding his sleeve up to his head and dabbing warily, as if it would begin to bleed at any moment. He worried far too much about blood, although one poor moment of contact against a rusty nail, and it was a harsh infection for him. Naomi's lips curled up, as she tittered behind him.

“They snuck a little bit of extra food into my bag for working the kitchen, but a growing boy needs a little bit more than me.” Naomi extended her hand, offering up a half-dollar sized biscuit with grains of sugar that coruscated in the fluorescent lights.

“Don't pull a scandal now, lest they shoot you dead.” He made a flippant remark, rolling over and landing with his feet on the floor. His dated moccasins, the toes so tight that he would refuse to wear them inside, sat next to the bedpost.

“I'm a wonderful worker, much better than you.” They playfully sneered at each other, as Mordechai reached out and took the biscuit into his palms. Studying the texture as he rubbed his thumb around the bread, it began to crumble down. Scrunching up his nose, he popped the cookie into his mouth and began to savor the shortbread. Naomi giggled. “Treat me nicely, maybe next time I'll get you two.”

“You know what? You're crazy. Crazy,” Mordechai mumbled through a mouth of food as a loud commotion sounded from outside the room. He glanced out the open door with a quirked brow, eyes meeting a painfully familiar sight. Flocks of terrified men, women, and children began to shout and crowd like crows into whatever structures they could fit in. The sight left Naomi feeling dizzy, her knees wobbling. Sharing a short glance, the two made haste to climb up into the bed, the tension wafting into the building as others began to crowd around them. She knew very little of what could really have been happening, although there was one certain thing in her mind. Would an attack be upon them? A rescue, even? His heart began to soar with glee, in much contrast to Naomi's grim stare.

Perhaps normal situations were just that uncommon to the two. They always managed to find each other caught in the brim of sticky trials, though now that they were struggling together, things felt just as bleak as they did uplifting. Asking either of the two about the day they were taken, well, it would receive a harsh response. They had done nothing but wear the wrong necklaces in the wrong city, one being overran by hatred.

Stopping the evils of those who already held too much power was a ridiculous image, after all, who wanted to fight another war? Fruitless efforts were all too common, by neighbors and those an ocean away, though it had always been the job of the two teenagers to reassure those around them. Optimism, optimism was their key to changing the world. In hindsight, it seemed to be counter intuitive to fight it. After all, everything outside the walls, at least in the eyes of those inside, was a desolate wasteland. Perhaps they were just being gaslighted into staying here forever.

It was a quixotic dream of Mordechai's, being able to escape the dusty rooms in favor of a more idealistic place. A city, with buildings taller than mountains, and bright lights illuminating every step. Or perhaps a large, open field, with bright flowers like those that his grandparents would grow every season. Windmills would give them power, and fresh water, just the idea left him dazzled.

The crowd had congregated quickly, like flashes of lightning surrounding each other. With an abrupt swing, a teary-eyed Naomi tugged Mordechai into her chest and ignored his bloody screams of protest. They were well drowned out by the crowd anyways, but the sinking in her chest did not atone to her misery.

"Let me go! Let me go!" His shouting exerted what little energy he had conserved. It mattered little now, the comforting softness of her embrace, or the small whimpers of encouragement that slipped past her lips. His focus was directed towards breaking her vice-like grip.

"You're so loved, Motta," Naomi mumbled into his ear, increasing in volume with the lasting prayer that he could hear anything she was saying. "You're so loved, Motta, you're so loved." His shouting began to simmer down, teary eyes digging into his elder sister's shoulder. Tears leaked past Naomi's stern guard as she held that boy tighter than ever before. His hands found themselves comfortably wrapped around her shoulders, meeting the ends of her curls. Again, she repeated, "You're so loved." Her throat began to feel hoarse, although she didn't register the pain, and he couldn't notice over the ringing in both of their ears.

Coming to droned on for longer than anything before, and even then, once Mordechai was partially in the right mind, his eyes met a bleak scarcity in anything but debris. At least, that was what he could make out, an unrecognizable abyss. There was an overwhelming tingly sense lingering through his numb limbs; a fiery pain shot into his chest. Mordechai's eyes flickered back and forth as he desperately tried to work through the haze of a dark chaos. All in a forlorn attempt to find Naomi, or anybody else. Even though it didn't look like anyone was around. The numbness reduced to a sharp, stabbing impression as Mordechai forced himself up against the rubble of the collapsed concrete.

The pressure on his chest forced all the breath out of him, though as he was regaining his composure, he began his nearly manic search. He found himself stumbling over his two feet, arms outstretched as if he was trying to swim through the tense, smoky air. The black spots in his vision clouded what little of the rubble he could sort through in a desperate attempt to find Naomi. His trembling hands worked to overturn stones and tear past shreds of course fabric. As one brushed faintly

over a clump of knotted, curly hair, a pained cry escaped his thin lips. He didn't need to search anymore, and in the haze of shock, Mordechai turned hastily and knocked into a crumbling wall.

"Hey, please! Naomi, are you there?" He blubbered out, incoherent mumbles in between words blended with sore, lamenting sobs. "I can't see- I can't-" pausing between heavy breaths, Mordechai drew himself into hysterics, dropping onto his knees with his head bowed. His world was collapsing onto him, an insubstantial tower of regrets and spite.

The sensation that coursed through his veins ceased abruptly, accompanied by the soft hitching of his breath, and the muffled thud of his chest hitting the ground.

***A Sweeter Sound* — 3rd Place Winner** **By Pim Noparat**

I was on my way to end my life when I found it.

It's priceless. The most precious thing in the world to me. It turned my life around and gave me faith again. It's hope and happiness and peace all wrapped into one. It's the one thing that pulled me out of a miserable life when I couldn't do it myself.

Since I was young, I could barely remember being happy. Don't get me wrong—I had a good life. A house to live in, food to eat, nice clothes to wear, and a warm bed to lay in at night. By no means was I ever poor, but I never quite felt complete either. I had average grades and a couple of friends, but that wasn't enough for my parents. Dinners were spent arguing about why I couldn't be as good as my sister. Aimee was the golden child of the family who never once failed to pocket a 4.0 GPA, continuous victories in her various sports championships every year, and a large social circle. And to top it off, she was polite and friendly. Everything I wasn't.

Despite this, Aimee and I had a close relationship. We had a rule to always be there for each other, and that carried until I was seventeen. Fed up with my parents, I got a job and saved enough money for a dingy apartment in the middle of the nowhere two towns away. From then on, I lived on my own, estranged from my parents.

I continued to scrape by on minimum wage, but as time went on, I began to have thoughts. I couldn't pay for therapy. The only thing I could afford was a diagnosis, and you could guess what that is. Instead of getting help, I just shouldered the thoughts and went on with my dead-end life.

I have so many regrets. There's a countless number of things I wish I could do over, but my biggest regret will always be leaving my parents with the last words I ever said to them: "*I'm so glad I can get away from you two.*" In the year I was diagnosed with depression, both my mother and father passed away. I got the news at 3am, startled awake by Aimee's call. I took the first day hard. I spent the hours sobbing in bed, but in the following week I just felt numb.

That's how it went for years. If I didn't feel that numbness, I certainly felt miserable. Aimee begged me to come back home, but I refused. I couldn't bear to see the place I left behind. I didn't even attend the funeral. It was too painful, but Aimee interpreted it as the long-standing grudge I had against our parents. She screamed and yelled at me about how horrible I was. I don't blame her.

She cut off all contact with me and moved on to settle down and have a child named Hana with her husband of three years. My parents were right: She was successful while I amounted to nothing.

I continued to cope with monotonous, exasperating days and miserable, excruciating nights. The thoughts had free reign over my mind at night when I had nothing to distract myself. Shutting them out did no good. They'd always find a way to force themselves in.

It was another one of those nights. The nights where the insomnia would kick in and the thoughts and feelings would creep and crawl into every crevice of my brain until I passed out from exhaustion. I was so tired. Too tired.

It was at that point I realized as I lay in bed, *what was the point anymore?* If every day was torture and everyday was the same, what sense was there in staying? I got angry. Who the hell was anybody to tell me that I had to live, that I had to stay? I had nobody. I'd already lost my parents, my friends, and the only connection I had left with my sister.

I grabbed my car keys and phone, haphazardly throwing the sheets around in an attempt to make my bed. I straightened up the contents of my nightstand and kicked my trash under the bed. Figured I might as well tidy up for when they come for my things.

I drove miles away from that awful place and made my way up the mountains where the air got colder and thinner, but I was finally able to breathe. The view might have been the most gorgeous thing I've ever seen: Autumn painted the scenery shades of yellow, orange, and red and the night sky contained more stars than I'd ever seen in my twenty-eight years.

Maybe they'd always been there, maybe I was too caught up in myself to notice.

I finally reached the spacious ledge over the mountain where the only safety precaution there was a thin railing lining the overlook. Stepping out, I debated getting it over with or savoring the view—I chose the latter. Might as well treat myself to something nice before I go.

I leaned over the railing and looked down below where my crushed car and I would be at the bottom. Where did I go wrong? I suddenly fell from a content life to contemplating suicide.

My phone rang, interrupting my thoughts and vibrating violently as I fished it out of my pocket. Aimee's caller ID was bright and bold on the screen. I chuckled at the irony. My reason to live that I had lost years ago was now calling me just as I was on the verge of driving me and my car to the bottom of a cliff.

"Hello?" I figured I'd answer. I wanted to tell her goodbye.

"Is this...Asa?" an unfamiliar voice came through the speaker.

"Yeah? Who is this?"

"You were in this woman's emergency contacts," the man ignored me. "There's some...news."

Aimee, her husband, and Hana had gotten into a car crash. The same way I planned to die. My sister and brother-in-law were dead on site, but Hana was still in rough condition at the hospital.

My legs moved on their own as I got into my car and sped out of the mountains into Aimee's town an hour away.

Aimee's dead.

Aimee's dead.

Aimee's dead.

The only thing that went through my head was that Aimee—my only reason for living—was gone. Aimee's dead.

I pulled into the hospital and ran for it, checking myself in and shoving through the door into the ER where Hana lay motionless. My head was filled with static as the doctor explained the situation. All I

saw laying on that bed was my little sister. Hana looked just like her, from the long black hair and tan skin to the bewildered, naive expression plastered on her face as she watched me come into view.

“I’ll leave you two be,” the doctor slipped out of the room silently, but I paid no mind as I took Hana’s hand in mine.

“Who are you?” she croaked out.

“I’m your uncle. I’m Asa,” I answered awkwardly. I was never too good with kids.

“I didn’t know I had an uncle.”

“Ah, well,” I chuckled dryly, “I guess your mom never told you.”

“Where’s mom and dad?”

“They’re…” I trailed off, eyes darting everywhere but to Hana. How are you supposed to explain to a little girl that her parents are dead? Nevertheless, a little girl who doesn’t even understand the concept of death yet?

“I don’t know.”

“Will they be back?”

I didn’t answer, only squeezing her hand tighter.

The room fell into painful silence as Hana closed her eyes. I watched the shallow rise and fall of her chest, tears welling up in my eyes. *I screwed up. I ruined everything and I didn’t even get the chance to apologize.* I cried silently as to not wake her up. No matter how hard I tried to hide it, nothing could mask this mess.

When she woke half-an-hour later, I was grabbing tissues, but per my luck, I tripped over a wire and I fell face-first onto the floor. Hana witnessed the entire thing. She stared for a good five seconds at my misfortune.

And then she laughed. She laughed, like the tinkling of delicate bells. A sweet, dainty sound. I hadn’t heard that sound in years. It felt so unfamiliar hearing something that radiated happiness. There was no sweeter sound than the laugh of someone who has been through hell.

I laughed along with her. I told her about myself. We played games and joked and sang. In the hours I sat by her side, I forgot about my past and my baggage.

Suddenly, her small, timid voice cut through our shared giggles. “Are you staying?”

I froze. I couldn’t even take care of myself, how was I supposed to care for a child? *No*, I thought. *I won’t be staying.* But her eyes—I saw a child who’s had to go through everything a child shouldn’t have to go through. I saw shock and sadness and misery and anger and confusion. I saw myself.

All my life, everything was a blur of questions. I was just some aimless nobody. I had nowhere to go and nothing to do. I knew nothing about my future, but in that moment, I knew I had found it in Hana. A second chance. My reason to live.

It was then that I knew my answer. I wanted to hear the tinkling of delicate bells again.

Grade 9 Short Story

The Question of Trust — 1st Place Winner

By Jessica Beck

An excerpt from A History of Things Left Undiscovered by Explorer and Writer Neal Erik Bronzer

The building was founded in 1932. Its walls sagged with age and had discolored with intervention of the sun. The rusty scarlet bricks encompassed the entirety of the building's front giving it the orange coloration of ripe papaya flesh when the sun rose in the morning. The rest of the structure was forgotten as money ran tight and the price of bricks soared. These forgotten walls were instead constructed of cheap rotting hazel oak wood harvested from the forests surrounding the feeble building. There was a small steeple upon the building reminding all who gazed upon it of its past life as a grand church. The deep mahogany door and oak boarded sides of the building came alive with the surrounding scent of fresh pines from the forest.

To your eyes, however, the church-turned-library was hale and hearty in its half-fallen state. By the time of its 60th birthday the structure had switched hands countless times until it fell to the ownership of an aged librarian who is rumored to be an entity of the devil and in contact with evil, departed spirits. Since then it had become home of the broadest collections of rare and often mysterious and questionable books and records. As the years passed the library faced its fate; to be forgotten by the world and to dwell in the middle of a pine forest for what felt like eternity.

When I entered the building the first thing I noticed, as any normal person would, was the stench of mothballs and freshly warmed printer ink. Everything within the library seemed average; shelves upon shelves of rotting old books and films filled with stories and knowledge. The hunched librarian dressed in a traffic-light green blouse that perfectly complimented her emerald eyes stood behind her desk barely even looking up from her book to see me. I was probably the only visitor she had seen in months. The only thing that seemed out of place was a scroll perched on a windowsill next to a pot of dead hydrangeas.

“He left that for you dear,” muttered the old librarian.

I whipped my head around in shock. The prehistoric specimen speaks.

“The flowers too?” I asked the ancient lady.

She nodded slightly, “Okimma, what a beautiful name.”

“How do you know my name!”

“That young fellow came in here and kept muttering about you under his breath” she stated calmly, “Eventually I asked who Okimma was. His description of you was perfect. Black hair like a chalkboard; check. Gray eyes; check. Whimsically beautiful as if she had just walked in from a cold winter’s day, check. He certainly had a way with words, that young fellow. Well don’t sit here talking to me, read his note!” She finished gesturing to the scroll next to the remains of the flowers.

I unfolded it carefully as to not rip the delicate parchment. It read:

Okimma,

Get out while you still can.

-Memores sumus vestri amemini

There is only one person I know who sends letters on ancient crumbling pieces of parchment signed with Latin love phrases, James. The question now is not who sent the letter but whether or not I trust him. I seem to always reach this dilemma; last time it was whether or not to trust his testimony of innocence in court when he was on trial for murder, now it is whether or not to flee from the answers to all of my life questions. Answers about my mother's untimely disappearance, answers about Maria's past, answers about Aza's murder, answers about James. Why does he stalk me of all people? Why does he want me to fall in love with him? He is cunning and handsome with his darkened tan skin, black hair rolling across his scalp, rounded blue eyes, and deceptive faint smile. It's not like I'm pretty or have strange magical powers for him to lust after! But why he's after me is not my current problem.

Now my problem is the constant movement of time.

Tick, Tick,

Seconds move by.

Never enough, never enough.

And

I'm

Just

Standing

Still.

If James is telling the truth something awful is going to happen, and soon.

If he is lying it probably is also part of one of his big schemes to destroy me and the organization.

Should I leave my life's desire behind and travel along another spiraling journey to find answers or should I stay and encompass myself in the realm of knowledge, comforted by the true story of my past. I was left with too many questions. After what I have faced, I would like to know why death followed me everywhere. I would like to know why the officials choose me to be a spy for their secret organization. I would like to know if my mother is alive. I would like to know if James was actually guilty. All of those answers and more could be found in the shelves of this library that has lived its life off of maps due to its well-hidden location and loyal workers hiding it from outsiders like me. Should I use my precious minutes inside these walls to look for James or should I get my information and get out like the note said? My brain became a battlefield of two very different voices neither of which was my own but both which I knew all too well.

"You love him!" half of my brain screamed. All I could see was the blood seeping through Aza's shirt, her lungs sputtering to inhale, her heart ready to give up. She looked so much like my mother, but she had our father's eyes, that was one of the only things we didn't share. I remember the moment that the color left her face and her bright blue eyes became frosted over like an iced lake and rolled backwards in her head. I remember the smile that she gave when life had finally left her bruised and battered body. I imagine what she saw that convinced her to use the last bit of her energy to grin like that. I puzzled over what it was, and, in that moment, I longed to see the vision that crossed her eyes as she faded slowly from this world. But my grief-stricken moment was short lived. Because then James appeared over my shoulder, and in less than a second I went from a logical and dauntless person to an idiotic coward. His shadow blocked out the warm sunlight sending a chill down my spine. I couldn't bring myself to look into the whites of his eyes and search for the truth. I would have known if he

murdered my little sister if I had only looked at him. But I couldn't. I didn't want to hate him. I didn't want to love him. Once glance would have decided our fate. But in the moment my grief was more important than that answer, now everything has changed.

One thing will never change though; I will never forgive myself easily.

I will never forgive myself for Aza's murder. The thought of my Aza and me brought back memories. How easy it would be to return to Auburn, Pennsylvania and live innocently the way I did when I was a child with a peaceful life, before secret wars, before James. There is much I would be happy to forget. But I have always to remind myself that there would be nothing to go back to. I made my choice and now I live with it like a tattoo. It is a part of me; it can never be erased.

I look down at the note in my hand with James' curly handwriting and Latin love phrase decorating the ominous warning.

"Get out while you still can."

I made my choice then. Another tattoo on my skin, another branding on my mind. Those choices are weights holding me down making it harder and harder to move forward. Can I risk adding one more decision? When will I run dry of empty skin to fill with the ink of pain and suffering? When will my mind collapse under the pressure of grief? But there is no point in doing nothing. Boundaries exist to be tested. How much farther do my boundaries go? Now I might just find out.

I make my choice.

I glanced towards the librarian's desk; the shriveled woman was gone.

There is nothing left here.

I trust.

I am a fool.

My legs break into a full force sprint.

I dash back to the pot of dead hydrangeas on the windowsill. They were my mother's favorite flowers. I smashed the pot to the ground. A baby-blue one book lay in its place adorned with a picture of my parents and Maria's parents and another couple I didn't recognize, the man looked suspiciously like James and the woman had his cobalt-blue deceitful eyes, his parents I suppose. I didn't even look at the book's title before sprinting towards the red exit sign and bursting out of the building. I halted on the other side of the swarming highway panting and gasping for air. The sun blazed down on me as I turned the small book over to read the Latin title:

Qui Autem non Habeat Fiduciam

Translated: Those You Can Trust

Then the earth shook with force enough to throw me onto the ground.

I turned to gaze upon the crumbling burnt remains of the library of knowledge. I rose from the green grassy field and looked at the scene of destruction before me and for only a moment I was overwhelmed with *deja vu*. Death, destruction, loss, all too familiar now. I looked back to the note James wrote to me.

"Get out while you still can."

He was right; he saved my life.

Aza's frozen eyes flash into my mind.

The image of James' parents and Maria's parents smiling next to my mother and father accompanied by those four words: *qui autem non habeat fiduciam*.

Who do I trust?

Even now, I wasn't certain.

But I had to keep moving.

Sometimes that is the only way to deal with grief. You keep moving and absorbing new information to distract you from reality. You form for yourself a new memory and make yourself forget the grief to make space in your mind for more important information and for more important tasks, Keep moving. Keep moving. Keep moving. That way you can forget all of the awful parts of the world and all of the things that others have done to you and forget all you have done wrong.

But you can't imagine forever.

Eventually the weight of the world piles up onto you and it becomes too overbearing to go on. You can ignore this weight for a while, you can imagine it away, but eventually it will kill you. You will find yourself in a place where it is too painful to take in more information but too agonizing to stop attempting to ignore your grief. You stop, you collapse, you are as good as dead. No, you are worse than dead, you are empty, consumed with everything to such a degree that your soul gives out.

That is me. This is my reality. A reality I have tried to hide myself from my entire life.

I look up.

My sight meets eyes that are emerald green, the only sign of youthfulness on a wrinkled tanned-skin face of the prehistoric petrified specimen of a lady who has spent her life reading and learning and guiding.

"Do you trust me now dear? Do you trust him?" She asked me.

"What else can you tell me? I have so many questions." I answered.

But I know today trust isn't one of my many questions.

At least not for now.

***Birthmark* — 2nd Place Winner** **By Emily Leon**

My little sister, Violet, had a birthmark on her left cheek, just below her eye. It was noticeable to the point where people would stare at her when she walked past them. I always thought she took pride in her birthmark. She was always confident, never letting anyone tease her about that slight imperfection on her face. Along with her birthmark, she had pretty features. She had long, wavy brown hair, the color of milk chocolate. While everyone in my family shared the same colored light blue eyes, the color of the early morning sky, hers were different. She had intimidating eyes, green as the rarest four-leafed clover.

Her lips were thin, usually pulled tightly into a slight frown. She rarely smiled, but when she did, something about it made me uneasy. Instead of the normal, warm, sweet, and child-like, innocent smile, her smile stretched largely across her face, showing her large, yellow, and gapped teeth. Surprisingly though, people didn't pay attention to her smile because of the attention her birthmark drew to her face.

Her birthmark wasn't the only reason people teased her though. Whenever she did anything atrocious, she claimed Charlie made her do it. The problem was that Charlie wasn't a real person. When Violet was younger, my mother had taken her to therapy several times, but every therapist she talked to told her that Violet would grow out of it when she matured. The older she got, the worse her imaginary friend became. About a year ago, Violet and I agreed to babysit Johnathon, our next-door neighbor's

two-year-old son. At the time, Violet was eight and I was thirteen. Before they left to go out to dinner, our neighbors gave us specific instructions to give Johnathon a bath and tuck him into bed before 9:00 p.m. We decided to give him a bath and tuck him into bed earlier than that though, so that Violet and I could watch television in the living room downstairs before they came home. I had just turned on the faucet and watched the water begin to fill up the tub when Violet came into the bathroom, holding Johnathon in her arms. She had an odd look on her face, but whatever was on her mind, I knew she wouldn't tell me, even if I asked.

"I want bubbles," Johnathon demanded from Violet's arms.

I looked around the bathroom and noticed that there didn't seem to be any soap to put into the bath water.

"I think I saw some dish soap in the kitchen. I'll watch Johnathon while you go get it," Violet said.

I looked at Johnathon, sitting innocently in Violet's arms. Violet still had a strange look on her face, but he looked comfortable. Satisfied, I ran down the stairs and bounced into their kitchen. Along with the rest of their house, it was big compared to mine, even though Violet and I lived next door to them. I looked around the spacious room and spotted the dish soap on the kitchen counter. Suddenly, I heard a door slam shut from upstairs.

"Violet, is everything okay?" I called from the kitchen, loud enough so she could hear me from upstairs.

I waited a few seconds and didn't hear a response. I grabbed the dish soap from the sink counter and sprinted up the stairs. Just as I expected, the bathroom door was shut tight. I put my hand on the gold doorknob and twisted. To my surprise, the door wasn't locked, so I pushed the door open. Violet was standing over the tub, with the water still flowing out of the faucet, with her hand on Jonathan's head, pushing him under the water. His tiny arms struggled against the strength of her hands, but she managed to keep him under. She had this look of absolute insanity on her face, something I never thought I would see. Her brown hair was sticking up in different directions, her green eyes wild and delusional. I screamed as loud I could, hoping that someone, anyone at all, could hear me. I knew from the pits of my heart that I was on my own though, not a soul to help me in this situation. With tears beginning to run down my face, I pushed Violet onto the floor, breaking her grasp from the innocent toddler. I pulled Johnathon up from under the water, out of the tub, and pulled him close to me. His skin had a light blue pigment to it, but he continued to breathe, which meant that he would be okay after I gave him the mouth-to-mouth resuscitation I was taught to do in babysitting classes. I looked down at Violet with hatred, knowing I could never forgive her for what she had just done. She looked back up at me, not even with the slightest bit of remorse.

"Charlie made me do it," she said innocently.

Suddenly, any trace of insanity that was on her face vanished. Her hair went back down to her sides where it belonged. Her green eyes were calm once more. The only thing missing from her apathetic face was her birthmark.

***Stalingrad* — 3rd Place Winner**

By Rory Pugh

I woke up to the sound of Soviet artillery booming in the distance. This is the 78th day of fighting. My division, the 16th infantry division, is one of the many divisions surrounded in the rubble of Stalingrad. A familiar tune played over the Soviet loudspeakers far away. The song was periodically interrupted with the words, “Every seven seconds a German soldier dies. Stalingrad is a mass grave,” and was then followed by the sound of a clock ticking. This was broadcasted by the Russians all day and night. The temperature was -20 Celsius. My friend wrote in his diary that he had to brush his teeth with an ice pick. The truth is that none of us actually have anything to brush our teeth with. As I sat on the floor of a bombed-out house, I opened my tin of food and took out some stale bread to eat. One of the soldiers peeked his head out of a window to look around with his binoculars. Suddenly, a rifle shot rang out. A Soviet sniper put a bullet through his head. Immediately afterwards, the familiar words played, “Every seven seconds a German soldier dies. Stalingrad is a mass grave.” Then came the clock ticking.

Once all of the soldiers in the house packed up their supplies, we got moving. We exited out the back due to the sniper. Once we reached our position, which was a trench dug behind piled up rubble, we jumped into the trenches and laid our Kar 98ks down on the rubble. A MG 42 squad was positioned in the trench about five meters away from me. A PzKpfw IV rolled up behind our position along with Sdkfz 222. It was reassuring to have armored vehicles there. In the background we could hear the song and the words “Every seven seconds a German soldier dies. Stalingrad is a mass grave.” I wondered if I would be the next one.

The officer’s whistle pierced the silence and hundreds of Russian voices yelled into the air. The Soviet soldiers charged and my comrades and I fired our rifles. The heavy machine fired and it sounded like paper ripping. The noise was deafening. The Panzer IV fired its 75mm cannon. The shell landed in the middle of the Soviet infantry, blowing three enemy soldiers into the air. A rifle shot hit the soldier next to me in the neck. He fell to the ground writhing in pain. The soldier started coughing up blood and then stopped moving. For a second, over the din of battle I thought I heard the words, “Every seven seconds a German soldier dies. Stalingrad is a mass grave.” I thought I heard the clock ticking away.

The MG 42’s barrel was red hot. The gunners had to replace the barrel and let the current one cool down. The flood of Soviet troops slowed down as many were cut down by German bullets. The few remaining enemies fled, only to be shot by their own political officers. Finally, it grew quiet. I looked around at the destruction in front of me. The Soviet flag was lying on the ground 30 feet from our trench. The soldier next to me crawled out of the trench and ran to grab it. Right when his hand touched the flagpole, a single shot rang out. The soldier fell dead, right on top of the flag. We looked mournfully at his body, and we could hear over the speakers, “Every seven seconds a German soldier dies. Stalingrad is a mass grave.”

Once night fell, things got quieter. I went back to the partially destroyed house along with some of my fellow soldiers. Once we got to the house, we each opened another tin of rations and ate the small amount of food. We took shifts on watch and I had first shift. I sat shivering behind a wall, periodically peaking my head out through a hole to look for enemies. When another soldier came up to relieve me, I went and huddled under my blanket on the cold, damp floor. All night I heard the clock ticking.

One of my comrades woke me up the next morning to tell me that the *luftwaffe* was here. We ran to the second floor of the building and looked up at the sky. We could see six Ju 87 Stuka dive bombers closing in. The first rolled over onto its back and dived straight towards the ground. We could hear the siren mounted on the plane screaming as it dived. The plane pulled up, releasing its deadly payload and flew away. There was a huge explosion, causing the building that the bomb hit to collapse. The other five planes followed and dropped their payloads. Once they regrouped, the planes flew west. We were all wishing we could be going west. We all knew that we could be next.

We packed up our supplies once again, and all ten of us moved out. As we ran through the streets, praying that we would make it to our position, I saw a shadow move in a window of a bombed-out building. I didn't think anything of it at first, but as we moved forward, I started wondering about it. Was it just my imagination or was it a person? Was it a Soviet sniper or a German soldier? The answer came soon enough. A sergeant behind me screamed in pain. A bullet struck him in the leg, making it so he couldn't walk. He yelled for us to leave him behind. One soldier went to get him regardless, but the sergeant was already dead because the sniper had fired a second shot at him. We ran into a partially destroyed apartment building. Another crack of a rifle. Another one of our group was killed immediately. The loudspeakers played the song again. Another shot from a different direction hit my friend sitting across from me. The bullet went right through his helmet. Three of the soldiers left in our group decided to try to surrender. They walked out of the building with their hands up, yelling, "Don't shoot!" The Soviets fired anyways. They dropped to the ground. The four of us left were scrambling around in the building to get to a position that the snipers couldn't hit us. We could hear the voice saying, "Every seven seconds a German soldier dies. Stalingrad is a mass grave."

The clock began ticking. It seemed louder than before. Two soldiers in the building tried to find where the snipers were. One soldier spotted a Russian and fired his rifle at him. His bullet hit the Soviet and killed him. The other snipers quickly finished off the two soldiers. Me and the other remaining soldier looked at each other. We heard the loudspeakers say, "Every seven seconds a German soldier dies. Stalingrad is a mass grave."

Immediately after the voice stopped, a sniper shot the soldier across from me. So, there I sat, on the cold, damp ground, my back against a wall, counting down the final seven seconds of my life.

Sieben, Sechs, Fünf, Vier, Drei, Zwei, Eins

Grade 10 Short Story

***To Be Wanted* — 1st Place Winner**

By Madeline Umstead

What exactly is it to be 'wanted'?

This is a question that Jenny pondered every day. This wasn't a sexual kind of want she wondered, no, rather to be appreciated for merely existing in the presence of someone. What it was to be desired with a desperation not confused with lust or loneliness, but rather just because you make someone's life much better when you're in it.

Jenny wasn't a pathetic individual and she didn't perceive herself as such. She partook in many activities- the fine arts, academic contests, and she pushed herself to be the best she could be. But this didn't fill the emptiness she felt. Like she still was not enough.

It was like she was stuck at the bottom of a deep, dark hole. Sometimes someone would come along and shine a flashlight into the hole, offering kind words and keeping her company. She would think, "Maybe they'll help me out of this hole?" But in the end, they would leave, and the darkness would resume, and everything would be cold, painful, and have no meaning. Other times people would come along and instead of helping, they would make the hole deeper and make it more difficult for her to get out of the hole. At one point she just decided to reject all the people and never risk disappointment, rejection, and pain.

And it was through this mindset that Jenny lived her life.

It was on one unspectacular day that was part of a very droll week that she was walking down her school hallway. With her headphones on, she couldn't hear the hustle and bustle of the people around her, and instead it was like the whole scene was muted except for her. Everything was multichromatic, yet she was the one splash of black and white. She saw couples being affectionate against the lockers, people furious as their path to their lockers were blocked, bullies shaking down those weaker than them, friends laughing and shoving each other as they walked down the hallway, and more. And it was one group of friends that shoved one of their own, who came crashing into her, making them fall onto the tiled ground.

Her eyes blurred and her hearing grew fuzzy as her head made impact with the ground, and she could feel the guy's body heat. Through her daze, she heard him jokingly say,

"I think it's a bit early for me to be falling for you."

She regained her senses and took in her situation. The guy's position was a rather uncomfortable one, not to mention not very school appropriate. He was on his knees, her right leg in between them, one hand beside her head and the other hand by her side, an attempt to break his fall. He was smiling at her, but as soon as he realized his position, he blushed profusely and stood up, extending his hand to help her stand. She took it, her vision swimming as she stood, causing her to stumble.

"Woah!" The guy said, catching her. "Let's take you to the nurse," he said, supporting and leading her to the school nurse.

As they walked silently together, she took this moment to observe him. He had short blond hair with long bangs that swept into his eyes. He was taller than her, lanky but lean, and had peachy tan skin. His eyes, clouded with concern, were a brilliant blue that she found herself mesmerized by. He was dressed comfortably; he wore a blue and white sweatshirt, jeans, and light blue sneakers. All in all, he wasn't that bad on the eyes.

He noticed her looking and smiled gently, saying, "I'm sorry for ruining your afternoon. My name is Riley. I've never really seen you around, are you new?"

She replied, "It's fine, thank you for walking me to the nurse. I've always been here, I'm just not very sociable."

His eyes lit up, as if a lightbulb had clicked in his brain, and he said, "I'm the exact definition of an ignoramus. I'm so sorry. It's Jenny, right?"

Her eyes flitted to the ground and she quietly said, "Yes."

“Not very sociable, huh? That’s okay. My mom says that I can talk enough for a crowd of people sometimes. I used to be like that as well, but I met someone that made me realize I needed to get out of my shell to get anywhere.”, he said.

Jenny replied, “Who is she?”

He smiled bitterly and shook his head, saying, “You wouldn’t know him. He was my next-door neighbor, but it was only a few years ago we got close. Unfortunately, he died due to a tragic accident last year.”

“Oh,” she said.

“I really shouldn’t be unloading on you like this. I mean, you don’t even really know me. I don’t mean to bring you down with my problems,” he said.

She sighed, “It’s okay. I’ve had my own share. I’ve experienced a close one’s death. When I was younger, my father killed himself.”

Riley, using the arm he had around her, rubbed her arm as if to comfort. “You don’t have to talk about this,” he quietly said.

“I know,” she said.

And this she did know. She did not have to tell anything about herself or her life to this boy, who was basically a stranger to her. But there was something about him that made him different than those she had met before. He had approached her hole, just like others had before him, but nothing seemed fake about the kindness he offered. Maybe...just maybe?

She continued, “My mom had brought us into New York City so we could explore while she attended business meetings. My father had always been a bright and cheerful man, making me feel better with a single smile. And that day, nothing seemed different, he was the same as he always was. We went to the predictable tourist spots, including the Empire State Building. He went to the top and told me to stay at the bottom so I could take a picture of him. He kept me on a call so I could know when to take the picture.”

She stopped to take a deep breath, then continued, “It was then that he stood on top of the railing, and I knew something wasn’t right. His breathing got shallow and fast, and he started saying things that no one should ever hear from someone they love. As I tried to dissuade him from doing this, telling him of all the people he needs to live for, I could tell his mood had changed.

“You are right,” he said, as his breathing returned to normal. Maybe he had contemplated this and realized his life was worth living, that he wanted to still be there for me.

He moved to step down from the railing, but he slipped and fell. I could hear his screams doubled coming from him and the phone. He landed right in front of me. And that was that. His ending.”

Jenny instantly regretted telling this by seeing the shock in Riley’s eyes and feeling how he tensed up. But he just hugged her tightly.

“You don’t deserve to have had that happen to you. You deserve only the best things in life,” he mumbled.

She swiped away tears as her eyes watered. She whispered, “Thank you.”

They walked in silence from then on to the nurse. Riley explained what had happened and she checked to make sure that Jenny didn’t have a concussion, tutting at Riley.

“She does not have a concussion, thank the Lord. Take this ice pack,” she handed the pack to Jenny, “and you, young man. Hurting such a lovely young lady, you should be ashamed. Now, get out of here!” She said, shooing them out and shaking her head at a blushing Riley.

The school, mostly empty at this point, they grabbed their belongings from their lockers and left the building.

As she turned away from him to walk to her car, he gently grabbed her hand. “Wait, Jenny.”

She turned her head to face him, and she saw this emotion in his eyes that she couldn’t read. Guilt? Shame? Pity? “Look, Riley. I don’t want your pity. I’ll be fine now, so let’s just go our separate ways and pretend this never happened.”

“No,” he said, firmly.

“No?” she said, shocked.

He leaned closer, saying, “Nothing here is fueled by pity. I just want to be friends. We may not have talked much before, but,” he waggled his eyebrows, “I think fate brought us together. Can’t deny fate, now can we?”

She laughed, a sweet, clear sound that made Riley smile. “So? Friends?” he said, holding out his hand to shake.

She thought this over. This strange boy, who obviously thought he was a comedian, seemed to be interested in her. What he wanted; she couldn’t tell. That look he had in his eyes, it was something new, something she’d never seen before. Maybe it was what she was searching for.

She took his hand, “Sure.”

With that, he brought her hand to his face and kissed the back of it, and said, “Can’t wait.”

He left, leaving Jenny rooted to her spot. As she went her own way, she felt different somehow, as if there was a spark of color in her heart, lighting up amidst the black and white.

The next day, she arrived at school and expected Riley to have forgotten about her. But she was surprised when her eyes were shrouded with darkness as hands covered her eyes.

“Guess who?” a voice sung, but a voice she recognized.

“Riley?” she said, her voice cracking with disuse.

The hands were removed, and he appeared before her. He said, “Correct!”

She was bewildered that he was here, meaning he meant what he said the day before.

“What are you doing here? Shouldn’t you be with your friends?” she muttered.

He lightly punched her in the shoulder. “You are my friend, remember? Or did I give you memory loss when I knocked into you yesterday?” he said, laughing.

She crossed her arms and frowned, which made him back away with his hands up.

He said, “Woah, woah, okay. I see jokes about that are not allowed. Well, I guess I’ll have to see what topics can be joked about.”

And with that he would walk with her to her classes, sit with her at lunch, and hang out with her, cracking jokes the entire time. It was like he was her comedic sidekick in a superhero movie. Of course, that would make her the superhero, a greatly inaccurate assumption, but she found herself appreciating this boy who stuck by her side and warming up to the idea.

Days passed, turning to weeks, and then to months. Riley became Jenny’s closest person--not quite a friend, but not quite a boyfriend. He was the person in her life that convinced her to come out of

her metaphorical shell. The more she was with him, the more she could feel the warmth and color inside of her grow and take over what previously was grayscale.

One day, the pair were sitting at lunch together. Jenny said to Riley, “Why did you decide to be friends with me? You could’ve just left me on the floor of that hallway. You could’ve pretended we never interacted. Why did you?”

Riley took a few seconds to think. “I’m not exactly sure. Maybe you reminded me of myself from a while ago; perhaps we could relate. But why I did doesn’t matter. What does is that I’m glad I did because I couldn’t ever live without you in my life. You brighten my day and make my life so much better when you’re in it.”

It was then that Jenny truly realized what it was to be wanted, and it was a feeling she never again wanted to be without.

***The Lost Language of the Galapagos Island*— 2nd Place Winner-Tie By Jake Gillespie**

Nobody ever expresses any interest in becoming a linguist when they are little, or at least they don’t ever say they would be the kind of linguist I am. It’s always astronaut, or firefighter, or police officer; no one ever thinks to become an ancient linguist.

It’s kind of a shame, really. No one ever thinks to even try the field of ancient linguistics, so most people will never even know if they like it or not. Personally, I first looked into the field years ago, but I didn’t know why.

I suppose a better way of putting it would be that I didn’t *exactly* know why. Truth be told, I was drawn to something; almost like a calling from God, but not precisely. It was the letters of a specific ancient language that caught my eye many years ago.

The language bared no name, for it was far too obscure, and still is too obscure, for scholars to pay any attention to it. It came from an archipelago not too far off the coast of Ecuador, better known as the Galapagos Islands.

Historically speaking, the islands were discovered in the sixteenth century. But it wasn’t convincing enough to me, because unlike many researchers, I actually bothered to do my homework. There exists only a handful of primary sources regarding humanity’s first steps on the isolated islands. All of these documents were diaries written by Spaniard Fray Tomás de Berlanga and his crew. As most island discoveries go, the encounter was purely accidental.

But throughout the poorly written and boring journals, the language is never mentioned... and these men were Spanish, so they spoke the appropriate language. What motive do a couple of sailors have to make a secret undocumented language? They didn’t. There is no possible way even the smartest person in the world could convince me otherwise.

Even in the islands’ later years, not a single explorer mentioned the weird language. Even Charles Darwin, who’s most defining trait is of him being an observant man, never once wrote about the mysterious letters.

The only historical explanation for all of this was that the letters were ostensibly drawings of unimportant things that the first explorers wanted to etch into rock for leisure. And that’s exactly why

I'm so curious. What kind of events would lead to the language being born? Where did it come from? Why did people use it? How *many* people used it? So many questions, but with little to answer them with. Nothing but photos of forgotten letters that seemingly no one cared about but me.

The photos are on the bulletin board in my office, front and center. I've always wanted to conduct more extensive research on the language, but with my strict and stuck-up boss constantly monitoring the halls, there was always nothing much I could look into. They've just been sitting on the wall for a couple of years now, collecting dust and scarcely do I ever even glance at the images.

That is, until now. I was beyond tired of waiting to look at the images more closely. Tired of my stickler of a boss constantly barking at me to be more productive. I wanted nothing more but to try and decipher the never-before-seen lettering.

I patiently waited for my boss to leave the room after he gazed over my desk. His productivity checks occurred in random intervals, but I recognized that I was safe for at least some time after he had left the room.

After I saw his leg exit the door, I rose quietly and unpinned the pictures, hurriedly bringing them to my desk. It didn't take long for my colleague, Joan, to realize what was going on.

"What are *you* up to, nerd?" She asked inquisitively.

Joan was the kind of person to mess everything up. On purpose. Unlike most of us, her college personality just never left her. She had a bachelor's degree in linguistics, but a master's degree in the art of pretending to be busy.

"I'm working," I replied, not giving her eye contact.

"Busy looking at pictures from your bulletin board? Yeah, right."

"Please leave," I ordered politely.

"No. I'm bored. I hate this job. Why can't you tell me what you're *really* doing?"

I paused, and responded, "knowing you, you'll inadvertently grab the attention of our boss, and he'll rip my pictures to shreds. Go away, before he comes back."

"Those letters repeat often," she pointed at one of my pictures. Typical Joan, not caring about what I said. She was well into her own investigation of my photos before I could shoo her away, "I bet that pattern is a definite article. You know, like 'the.'"

Giving up on trying to lose her, I sighed, and began to play along, "that's what I was thinking, too."

The pattern occurred throughout the photos, and it was two characters long. I grabbed a blank piece of printer paper and started to write down the symbols in the corresponding spots on the photo, writing 'the' on top of the symbols. The symbols appeared four times.

"How about the next letters?" Joan asked, impatiently.

"I'll rewrite them so we can see them better," I suggested.

The first word I wrote down in the top left corner of the photo was six characters long. But as I was writing it, something happened. I could have sworn on my life that I didn't know what the word meant before I jotted it down, but as I was writing it, my mind seemed relaxed. It felt as if all of my stress was floating away- my boss, my job, my financial problems- all of it seemed to clear out.

I finished the sixth letter and lifted my pen gracefully. It took me a few moments to realize that Joan was yelling in surprise.

She shouted, "water! Water!!"

Then, I noticed it too. It came out of the palm of my hand. It was water. No. Ocean. My mind found the word for it.

“Oh my god!” She screamed.

The water stopped leaking from my hand after a while, but I felt too relaxed to even notice. It felt like I was on some drug; everything in the real world seemed silent for as long as water rushed out of my hand.

“Ocean,” I stated.

“Yeah, no kidding,” Joan bellowed, “and these photos were just... chilling on your wall, for years? This doesn’t even make any sense! You can’t just create matter out of nothing; everyone knows that.”

But I was too excited to care about the logic behind all of it. I wanted to try it again. It was magical. No wonder I had been so attached to those photographs for so many years.

I wrote another thing down on the paper. The second word, other than ‘the,’ contained four characters. I promptly picked up my pen, not missing the curvature or cutting corners on any of the lettering. As I wrote the word, I felt lighter. The best way for me to describe it was that I had the rollercoaster feeling. Butterflies flew rampantly in my stomach.

Again, my hand emitted something. Not water, this time, but something that had presence only in feeling, not in shape. The word seemed to solidify itself in my brain. It was wind.

The wind blew from my hand, uncontrollably, and it forced my arm around like a leaking balloon. The force of the wind was robust, and it cleared my desk of any loose papers, including the bizarre photographs.

I didn’t realize it at the time, but Joan’s hair became disoriented from my hand’s uncontrollable windiness. The wind supposedly hit her face so hard that tears were shed. But she promptly wiped them away.

She shouted like an eager four-year-old on a playground, “let me try,” and proceeded to excavate the photographs out of the disarray of boring, but important paperwork on the floor. It was a gleaming treasure chest in a pile of sand.

Joan collected a paper to write on, hastily choosing an envelope, and began writing down the next set of letters with a tint of insanity displayed on her face.

It was around that time when I realized that my boss was already a few steps deep into the room, and his reaction was appropriate: a set of certain curse words. But by the time he could piece together the wet floor and the disorganized mess, Joan had already completed writing the letters.

“It’s... umm... Joan? What is the word this time?”

Joan carried a rather bleak expression. An expression of fear. Her demeanor sort of scared me a bit. Not in the sense that she looked kind of gloomy, but in the sense that whatever she was feeling in the moment was going to generate into the palm of her hand.

After a few moments of blissful silence, she responded calmly, “thunderstorm.”

Then I felt the magic transfer to me. Actually, it wasn’t magic. It didn’t feel the same as when I wrote down the word myself. But I could feel a *different* word solidify in my head.

“Uh-oh.”

Flag Girl— 2nd Place Winner-Tie
By Rosy Gao

Running. I am running.

Gasping for breath as I pour all of me in sprinting towards the tower, not minding the commotion that surrounds me.

Crack! A bombshell explodes to my right, and for a moment, I pause. Suddenly, all of the memories rush back to me.

I am eight years old. I am running, running from them. They've almost taken over our city, and there is complete chaos. Confusion envelopes me. I am alone. I open the door to the little bakery across the street that sold adorable macarons and zesty madeleines that we used to visit every weekend, but this time, the lady immediately grabs my arm and yanks me into a darkened room, bolting the door, trying not to cry as she holds on to me.

They took over our country. They sectioned each of our cities off with twenty-foot barbed wire fences, armed with towers stationed with their soldiers. We were not to leave. They made us slaves. Stripped us of our belongings, identities, and educations.

And families.

I am twelve years old. We are running. Mother is screaming, telling them that they can't take him away. I am too dazed to fully comprehend what is happening. I hold on to Grace's hand and follow Mother. One of their men had come to our house and proclaimed that my father's previous profession had offended their government. And then they loaded my father into the back of a truck, carting him away like I had seen animals being taken away in the country.

We tried everything to hear about Father. We exchanged our already sparse rations for miniscule bits of information about where they took people away to.

We never saw our father again.

I am thirteen years old. I am running, frantically searching through the streets, calling for Mother. Desperate, I ask anyone I pass if they have seen Bernadette Audentia. I once had hold of Grace's hand, but I do not know where she is anymore. A few days later, a once-neighbor I meet on the street on the way to work in the chemicals factory, full of sorrow, informs me that she saw my mother's body lying next to the fence.

I never went to look.

Now I am fifteen years old. This is the street where I hid in the back room of our neighbor's bakery, where I lost my father, where I searched for my mother and learned of her death. The bakery is now a book incinerator, long gone. As are my parents. I keep on going. The building is close. After all that I have been through, I cannot give up now.

A gunshot resonates through my ears. I look up. A girl is falling from above. She is holding something — something beautiful. She lands at my feet.

Andriana.

The crowd around me disperses, but for a moment, I am still. I do not notice the bullets whizzing around me.

Her face is composed, her hair spread about her on the sidewalk, her mouth almost upturned into a smile. But she is motionless.

Part of me wants to ask her why she is still pretending to be asleep. Andriana contended that if she can't see you, you haven't found her. We are only playing hide-and-go-seek, and it is only time to go to a make-believe tea party.

We were first grade best friends. We giggled and played and braided each other's hair. We shared our secrets and neatly packed lunches and dreams of becoming lawyers someday. Before this all began.

Andriana gave her life pursuing another dream — one we all share. I hope we may fulfill it for her.

"Nadia!" they call. It is my turn.

I will continue Andriana's dream when she can no longer.

Tony gives me a skintight slippery bodysuit and suction-cupped rubber shoes. He takes the object from Andriana's hands and places it into mine. A flag. The sunlight glints off of its golden pole, and the beautiful colors leave me in awe for an instant. There is a hole where the bullet struck both Andriana and the cloth.

Hope.

I carry hope.

Tony pushes me toward the building, and though he reassures me, I can discern the anguish in his eyes. I take hold of the rope already strewn by the first person who tried and begin to climb the structure of glass and steel in front of me, steadily and surely.

My legs are burning and my arms are aching. I am endeavoring in every step not to slip.

This is for Tony. I climb for those who cannot. I fight for those whose bodies will not allow them to. I was chosen because I am young and able.

The rope ends. I struggle to hold onto both the next ledge and the flag.

This is for Father. This is for all of the innocent people who had been taken, even though they had done nothing wrong. I am giving him a chance to be free.

A shell lodges itself into the panel to the right of me, shattering the glass.

Halfway there.

This is for Mother. This is for all of the people who departed searching for someone they knew. All of the people who departed trying to find a way out. I am sure Mother and Father would have been proud of me.

I follow the faint handprints up.

This is for Andriana. She gave her life trying, knowing that she might not make it. I will make it for her.

I have arrived at the top of the tower. I walk towards the center.

I see a bullet out of the corner of my left eye. I swerve.

Too late.

A sharp pain cuts my shoulder. I almost fall, but I regain my step.

I can see dozens of flags already placed on the highest buildings of cities from this vantage point. I can hear cheers going up as more are placed. They are all beautiful, saved from being burned when they took over us, or handmade, sewn with uneven stitches, but also care, in clandestine cellars from whatever leftover scraps of cloth could be salvaged. I can feel dozens of other cities yearning to do the same.

This is for Grace. Many people have lost their lives fighting for us. But my sister is only eleven years old. She will be able to experience the opportunities that we will have provided for her. This is so that all of the people who live will have hope for their futures.

My breathing is heaving. I cannot help but shudder.

I fasten the flag to the spire of the Empire State Building with all of my remaining strength.

We have scaled one of the tallest buildings in the world. We have fought to save our city and our country. They forced us to live under their rule for years, but we have not surrendered.

We have won.

The light begins to fade from my eyes.

I hear overwhelming cries and applause. I see flags fluttering over the highest buildings of every city to the horizon.

Red, white, and blue.

Superhuman “Lost Again” excerpt— 3rd Place Winner
By Shannon Cottingham

Why... Why did you not tell me...?

I sighed, and it was an hour after Mia and the others were separated due to another ambush from both Scarlett Red and Sapphire Blue Superhuman sides, but I was separated with someone else. Last time I was separated with Nick, but now I’m with Elana... and I could tell she has about a million questions just like her twin brother did.

Just my luck... I thought to myself, and Elana was just looking at me both confused and shocked. My forehead still tingled with the hair strand thin white galaxy outline from when Mia saved me from rejection, just like she did with Elana when she awakened.

“Tell me... Zion. Nick really isn’t the only Male Superling, isn’t he?” Elana asked me with a quiet, whispery tone. Her caramel-milk chocolate brown hair was covering her pale blood and debris dust-ridden face and hurt bright blue eyes.

“No. He is not. I awakened around the same age as him” I said plainly, but I didn’t want to think about what happened back then with my siblings when I awakened.

The druggy guy from the mafia... the loaded rifle... the screams and cries of my little brothers and sister... even now it still felt like yesterday. I knew what would’ve happened if I wasn’t there, if I hadn’t awakened at that very moment... we all would’ve met a brutal and terrible end.

I shook my head lightly and brushed it all away still looking at my just as dirty dark-skinned hands. That was years ago, and I can’t be stuck in the past again... for Elana’s sake. I looked over at Elana and sighed silently and got a cloth, her face was filthy with dried blood and debris dust from the ambush.

“Why then... did you not say anything about what you were when you awakened? You could’ve made history...” Elana said, but when she saw me go wide-eyed, she thought she asked a very, very personal question that I wasn’t so willing to answer.

She didn't know. She truly didn't know what kind of crap she had gotten herself and the other Superhumans into. I thought about it however, I knew more than what she or anyone else knew of... she had the right to know.

"What you think of my reaction is not because of personal significance... its more over I didn't say anything about it because I wanted to save my own skin..." I said to Elana, and I could tell this only made her more curious as to what I meant.

I was worried this would happen, though I also knew this would happen at some point, and Elana and the others will realize just how screwed up their government has truly become.

"The government lied to you, and they lied to all their citizens. The fact that only females can become Superhumans is nothing but lies. I learned this when I hacked into classified government files on PSI's (Psychically Inclined) individuals and those who have awakened, and the amount of male Superlings who awaken are about the same of that of teenage females" I said to Elana.

"Then how come the only Male Superhumans that are known are Nick and you...?" Elana asked, but I could tell from the look in her eyes that she knew where I was headed with this... and she knew it wasn't good.

"The government tracks down the early awakening male teenagers and does one of 2 things: changes their genetic code to get rid of the X-gene, or if that doesn't work... they are executed right off the bat" I said as blankly as I could put it, but not even I could hide the fact that I was kind of afraid as much as Nick would be.

Elana's eyes went really wide as she processed what I had told her, but we both were thinking of the same conclusion: *systematic gender-based genocide*. It had been going on for years, and under everyone's noses.

"No... I knew our government but..." Elana said with a stutter, and she looked down at the ground with a shadow over her eyes, "I didn't think they would go this low..."

I comforted her the best way I could, but I wasn't the best at it. I had isolated myself a lot since I turned 15, and now here I am with a girl who just turned 15 and I had to act my age which was now 18. *What would Mia do...?* I asked myself, half wishing she was here to tell me how to do it since she was always better at it.

I also didn't want to see her right now... I didn't want to explain myself, and I had hurt her too much already by revealing that I wasn't just a PSI. I should've trusted her more, and not because she was like my sister, but because we are part of the same subspecies of human from birth. We were both PSI's, and now we were both Superhumans. Well, she is... I'm just a Superling at the moment.

I was supposed to die a few hours ago, and I had predicted my own death, and it was by using too much of my unstable Superhuman abilities. I knew how Superhuman biology worked, and if you survived the awakening alone without being marked you couldn't use your abilities much or they will ravage your body from the inside... ever so slowly. That is what happened with me, until Mia ran in and marked me, stabilizing my powers and let my body heal.

Although now I was like Nick, and I was always like Nick. I was deemed an impossibility, and a target on the government's execution list along with Nick most likely. Mia and Jun-Jeonsa proposed a plan to escape the country from the Canadian border, but I am opposed to it.

I was very aware of how many international enemies our nation has, and its far more enemies than we have allies. The allies we do have however would hunt us down to once we step foot on their

soil and execute us on the spot. So, if we did escape the country to any other place... we would cause a war greater than the war within our own country.

Elana soon fell asleep, and I just looked at her for a second kind of jealous at how peaceful she looked to be sleeping. I thought again for a moment, and then walked out onto the patio of the still stable abandoned house Elana and I were hiding out in and looked over at the chaos that used to be a prosperous city of Los Angeles, California. Now it looked like a wasteland of abandoned buildings, ruined streets, and just barren grounds.

All I wanted to do now was to get back with the others and we will choose which chances to take, but that isn't happening at this moment.

The only thing we can do is wait.

Grade 11 Short Story

***Black Dahlia* — 1st Place Winner**

By Jenny Chen

“Hello?”

“Hello?”

“Hel- Oh hey! My name is D-...”

I only remember passing out.

I felt a tingling sensation in my arm, unpleasant as if something was shot into my body. I tried opening my eyes, but they only reached a squint before they were blinded by a scorching light. Groaning, I tried rolling to my side, but I quickly realized that I wasn't in bed when I went airborne, falling and knocking into a chair. I didn't mind the light now, I wanted to know where I was.

The room had two rows of empty chairs in perfect lines against the baby blue walls. There were no windows, no decorations, and no one at the reception desk. Desolate, almost. There was a girl sitting in a chair across the room, asleep. As she slept, I could hear her breathing. Her breaths were soft, blissful, ignorant of her cold surroundings. Yet I felt at peace as our breaths mingled in this lonely room.

I gritted my teeth as my body tensed up from another tingling sensation. Accompanying me was a thump across the room; the girl had fallen as well. I watched her look around, confused, as I had a few minutes ago. It didn't take long for her to glance in my direction. She rose to her feet, sheepishly, and smoothed out her shirt before walking over with a friendly grin. I stiffened. Who was she? Why were we here together? I smiled awkwardly.

She was about average height, average weight and had warm ivory skin. What stood out was her wavy black hair that had natural streaks of crimson red and her forest green eyes that complimented her hair.

“Hello,” she said cheerfully. Her voice was spirited, adolescent. Her friendliness captured me in a trance; the ambiance was no longer my concern.

I took a hesitant look into her welcoming eyes which made me smile. “Hello,” I replied.

I was relieved to see that my response had generated a delighted smile. “Um, what's your name?”

I opened my mouth to speak, but no words came out. I couldn't think straight. "My name...?" Silence overcame us; I dreaded it. How could I explain that I didn't know what my name was? My head throbbed; I couldn't remember anything.

The girl seemed to understand my struggle and turned the attention away from me. "Ah, well, my name is..." She stopped, just as disoriented as I was. But our minds continued searching for the meaningless answer.

It was my turn to break the silence, "Nice to meet you '...' What a coincidence that we have the same name." I extended my hand.

The girl laughed and shook my hand, "Nice to meet you too."

Despite the abnormal setting, we were focused on each other. We didn't want to think about the predicament we were in. Imagine how troubling that would be.

Another tingle was sent through our bodies, I flinched and sighed with exasperation. There was a click above us, followed by a message on the intercom from an automated female voice, "Please leave through the door to your left before you are terminated. Thank you." To our left we heard a mechanical whirring noise as a thick, rounded metal door, about ten feet high, was being lifted, exposing a dark passageway. The intercom's message repeated.

"Terminated?" The girl whispered, staring into the abyss.

Our fear of the unknown hushed us.

"Let's go," I said and nodded at her, hoping my artificial confidence would stimulate a positive reaction. I held out my hand which she took. The message repeated. We took one final look at the waiting room and walked into the tenebrous passage.

I felt the girl move closer as we made our way through the caliginous pathway. "We'll be fine," I reassured her. The ground shook when the door closed behind us, sealing off our only source of light.

"Let's see who can go the farthest faster with their eyes closed," the girl perked up.

"Alright." We let go of each other's hands, closed our eyes, and began running. Our footsteps were in discordance, we'd laugh whenever we grazed the walls or bumped into each other. Our mirth was eventually drowned out by the sound of cheering, the light was penetrating our eyelids as we neared the end.

By the time we opened our eyes, we were at the entrance of an arena. Thousands of people in the stands encircled us. The arena seemed to be modeled after the Circus Maximus except twice its size with surrounding walls that were fifteen feet high.

A click sounded above us, two speakers at the top of a pole on opposite sides of the stadium protruded. There were two big screens diagonally across from each other, giving the audience a closer view of the two specks in the arena. "Ladies and gentlemen, please welcome our next two contestants!" The crowd roared. "These two have lost their memories during their stay here, tell us now, do you remember your names? Do you remember why you're here? Most importantly, do you remember your family?" My head drooped as I shook my head.

"Aww," the crowd sympathized.

"Well, today is your lucky day! All you must do is complete these tasks and you'll receive your memories!" The announcer shouted.

The crowd chanted, "Do it! Do it! Do it!"

The girl and I looked at each other, "It can't be that bad, right?" The girl smiled, but there was concern in her eyes.

"Can't be." We smiled at each other. "Let's do it!" We pumped our fists in the air. The crowd erupted.

"Our contestants have agreed! Let the first task begin!" Our hearts raced. Two swords dropped from the sky into the middle of the stadium as a passage door behind us was being lifted, the earth trembled as deep growling reverberated from behind the door.

I dragged the fear-stricken girl to the middle and picked up a sword. I steadied it with both hands. The grizzly beast busted from its enclosure, it stood on its hind legs and roared into the sky. Its canines jutted out while its claws dug into the ground.

"Is it too late to change our minds?" I yelled at the speaker. My hope quickly diminished when I saw the beast run towards us on all fours, staring us down with its beady eyes.

"Run!" The girl screamed and we went off in opposite directions. My heart was beating double-time, my sword rapidly swung back and forth, and my legs carried me like the wind. I needed to get out, I was going to die here. Strangely enough, the earth's trembling was growing more distant.

The girl's screaming was drowned out by the audience chanting fervently, "Kill! Kill! Kill!" I whipped around; the girl running blindly and helplessly, she must've lost her mind when she decided to run to a corner. I looked at the sword in my possession and caught a glimpse of a boy's terrified expression.

"Seems like the girl is in a tiiiiight situation." The voice boomed over the intercom.

"Eat! Eat!" The crowd clapped as the girl neared the corner.

I found myself running to the girl, there was something about her that I didn't want to lose. I was faster than the beast, maybe I could save her I kept telling myself. The beast slammed its front paws into the walls of the corner, snapping its jaws. "EAT! EAT!" The chants grew louder.

I pushed my mind away and forced my legs to carry on. I brought my sword to my side, the edge of my blade pointed outwards. The beast raised a hefty paw, the girl closed her eyes, preparing to take her last breath. I swiftly dragged the blade through the beast's exposed heel before it could strike. It fell to the ground, grasping its wound, emitting painful cries that silenced the crowd. As frightening as it had been, we were the predators.

The girl and I embraced each other as we watched the beast being chained and thrown back into its enclosure. We heard soft weeping from behind the doors but it was quickly interrupted by "Congratulations! You've defeated the savage beast! Here comes your final task." The beast was quickly forgotten and the crowd started cheering yet again.

Two new swords descended from the sky on opposite sides of the arena. "Only one may proceed to the final gate. The other must die. If one quits now, then both will die." A few soldiers came out and forced us to our positions. "Let the fighting commence!"

"I guess we have no choice." The girl darted at me with her sword pointed at my chest. Before I had a chance to raise my sword, I felt a breeze rush past me, followed by a sting and the feeling of liquid slowly trickling down my arm.

"And the girl lands the first hit!" The announcer spectates as the crowd goes wild.

"W-Why are you doing this?" I sputtered. "Didn't I just save you?"

“Only one of us can leave as he said. And who said I needed your help?” She raised her sword and looked at me sharply. To me, her eyes were turning into the beady, malicious spectacles of a beast.

I lowered my body into a stance, preparing to defend, but I found myself to be stuck in a cyclone. I found myself spinning, turning left and right trying to stop her. It took many cuts for me to realize that her eyes moved in the opposite direction of her body’s motion. The crowd started to boo us; we weren’t killing each other fast enough.

Had our lives meant nothing? I didn’t want to die for their entertainment.

Finally, a metallic clash rang in the air, the forces of our blades colliding sent us back a few feet. As soon as I regained balance, I charged at the girl. I drew my sword back and swung at her, but she glided under and grazed my cheek with her blade. “Look, it’s a little boy trying to pick a thorny flower,” the announcer joked.

“Have you forgotten about your prize?” The spectators pitched in, “Don’t you want your memory back? Your family?” I did, I did, I did. The girl ran out of my reach before turning to face me. It was now or nothing. I saved her life; she owed me. I extended my sword, as did she, and ran full speed at each other.

Time had only been a concept to our hearts as they conversed on their own, ‘Don’t you think we can get out of here together?’ My heart fluttered.

‘We’ll both die,’ Hers responded.

‘I’ll get you out of here.’

‘No need, I’m happy now.’

My mind was too powerful to be stopped by emotion, I was determined. A gentle smile returned to the girl’s face as our blades crossed each other. “My name is Dahlia,” she whispered, “My name is Dahlia. My name is Dahlia.”

Joyous cheers broke the crowd’s silence. The exit gate opened for the victor to set foot. Free at last. But at what cost? A girl’s lifeless body was lying in front of me. Solemnly, I turned and trudged out without looking back. With every step I took, a memory returned. One step, of my family, another, of childhood friends, my first kiss, and thousands more. What was the point if I couldn’t share this happiness?

I’ve taken millions of steps by this point. The same memories replaying in my mind as I reached the peak of a grassy mountain. I’ve found her. I’ve finally found her. A single black dahlia with crimson red streaks. Tears trickled silently as I took one final step towards the flower, revealing one final memory.

I looked into the deep blue sky.

“I know it now, Dahlia.”

“My name is Wren.”

***Imagine* — 2nd Place Winner**
By Sophia Smith

Every kid needs a guide, a buddy, to help them as they grow up. Maybe it's someone they met at school, maybe it's their sibling, maybe it's a stuffed animal; maybe it's an imaginary friend.

Ashley would tell Grant about the time she first created him. She was just a little girl, but she was so lonely. She was watching the world go by, feeling like she wasn't a part of anything in particular and could never truly mean anything or fill any need. She felt like nobody understood her and yearned for a connection beyond the surface level. One night as she sat in her bed, she sighed at the thought of having someone to talk to, someone who would just pay attention to and look out for her. She couldn't bear the desolation any longer. She gripped her little hand into a fist against her thigh and dug her fingers into her palm, squeezing her eyes shut and imagining every detail of him in her mind. She held her breath and paused before opening her eyes, doing so bit by bit as she was anxious that her exertion would fail.

But there he was, standing right before her, just as she had pictured him, as if her mind had come to life. She named him Grant because he had granted her only wish; to have a friend. Even if he was just imaginary.

Most children have imaginary friends, but as they grow up their minds drift elsewhere, and the companion begins to fade away into the back of their mind until they are completely forgotten. But Grant grew up with Ashley and was there every step of the way. The older she got, the older he got. Everything she wanted him to be, he was.

One day she realized that most kids had long forgotten about their imaginary friends. But Grant was still her best friend in the whole world. He was the only thing that provided her with peace, companionship, and encouragement, and she could always confide in him and talk to him about anything.

But he could feel himself slowly fading away, dwindling more and more from her awareness as the days went by, becoming a blur of an elapsed existence. Grant knew that this was bound to happen someday, so it was really no surprise to him when he first began to feel this hazy ambiance. There was just one issue yanking at his core; he was in love with Ashley.

She was wonderfully chaotic. She would often talk to him about her "mind static," when her brain felt like the static you hear on the radio when it needs to be re-tuned, and she just couldn't seem to collect her thoughts or get them to stop. She found comfort in books, and spent hours in bookstores and libraries, picking out way too many, taking them home and letting them pile up unread on her nightstands and floors and shelves. She would tell him how she always had an elusive yet tenacious feeling of being out of place, and often wanted to just push everyone away, even friends who she liked. She was fond of photography, and there was nothing that nettled her more than when she took a really great picture but felt like a million other identical ones already existed. Sometimes she wouldn't cry for weeks and then one day she would just lose it over something not really worth getting upset over, and he would calm her down and console her for hours until she felt better. She struggled with her sense of identity, and often felt disconnected with her own mind. That's why she depended on Grant so much; with him was where she was her most authentic self. He had a deep understanding of her emotions, and she trusted him more than she trusted herself. She didn't think she was crazy for having such a

friendship with someone who wasn't real; she just knew she was lonely and afraid, and this was her way of coping.

...

He sat patiently at Ashley's kitchen table, waiting for her to come home from school. Soon enough, the warmth of her long dark brown waves came into view through the sliding glass door, delicately mirroring the light of the sun; each strand moving openly in the autumn breeze, a complement to her stillness. As their eyes met, the soft smile that graced her lips was in her every feature, and joy bloomed in his chest. She waved to him as she opened the door.

"How was your day?" he asked as she took her backpack off and went to get a glass of juice.

"Bad," she replied, in a colorless voice. "There's an ache in my chest and it won't go away. And I don't know how many coffees it takes to be happy, but so far, it's not three."

She sat down across from where he was sitting. "Do you ever just look around and watch what other people are doing? I see them all happy and confident and I wonder, 'Why can't I be like that?'" She set her glass down and fumbled through her backpack. "But then I think, maybe that's how other people look at me," she continued, with a contemplative look on her face. "I probably look totally fine." She took out a worksheet just to chew on her pencil and stare blankly at it. "I definitely don't feel fine. I guess there's no way to tell," she sighed softly, looking up at him and tranquilly smiling. "I'm so jealous of you, Grant. I'd love to just be detached from the bothers of life."

He smiled back at her, admiring her every feature and sighed contentedly to himself. He loved the enchanting depth of her brown eyes. They were like rivers of ink with flecks of gold and yellow, devouring light in their intensity and mirroring the heavens as if dark celestial planets were trapped inside them and held a wistful gaze so unwavering he found them hard to meet at times. He ached for the two of them to coalesce, for their souls to intertwine, so he could finally feel whole for the first time in his life. But they were separated; disconnected in every aspect, in every physicality, in every dimension, in every class of existence. Yet, he still yearned for her requited love. The agony of wanting someone so unattainable was heart wrenching.

"You know my friend Joyce?" Ashley interrupted his thoughts. He nodded.

"Well, today at lunch we were talking about this guy I met the other day. His name is Jack." Her face glowed bright pink as she looked down at her feet and smiled timidly. He felt a flicker of pain but tried his best to shove it away. "She said he stared at me every time I looked away, like he was ready to take a bullet for me," her eyes twinkled with excitement. "I think I might like him."

Jealousy surged inside of him. He curled his upper lip to keep himself from saying anything as his mind whirled with covetous thoughts. She slumped her shoulders at the intensity of his stare.

"You're upset." She frowned.

"No, I'm not." He replied in a brittle voice

"I know that face. That's your I'm-mad-at-you face. And your eyebrows also get really easy to read when you're mad, too," she said playfully.

It's a perilous thing to sentimentalize the past, but whenever he was upset with her, he had a tendency to craft mirages out of special memories he had of them, which almost always cleared his mind and made him forgive her almost instantly. He just couldn't resist the allure of nostalgia tugging at his heart, dragging up old reminiscences from the depths of his soul and devising them into his most chimerical fantasies. But this time, as anger boiled like a red fire inside of him, he just couldn't stand it.

He nearly turned green at the thought of her liking someone else and felt so bitter it was painful. He would have hypothetical conversations that he'd constantly play out in his head of how he'd tell her how he felt, but as the tightness in his chest deepened like a cinderblock on top of him, he knew he had to just go for it.

"I don't really know if the way I feel about you is normal."

"Huh?" She gave him a confused grin.

"I mean I..." he exhaled deeply, mangling his hands together anxiously. "I don't think you understand how dedicated I am to you. It's like you are the moon and I am the tides, I'm always reaching out, trying to get to you, but I never will, because we are in two different worlds, and I just don't know what to do about it. I mean... you're the only thing I think about and whenever I see you my heart does this weird thing, and I think I love you."

Panic flashed through him like lightning.

"I actually know. I know that I do."

As her brows drew together and eyes glistened with tears, a reflective look appeared on her face.

"Stop looking at me like you feel bad for me," his expression hardened with discomfort and embarrassment. "Stop it. I didn't tell you because I wanted to hear it back. I told you because I needed you to know," he professed warily. "Because I know that I'm fading away, and it's just going to get worse. But I don't want to fade away because without you I'll never be whole again, even if I don't deserve you. I still need you." His voice emitted sorrow and heartache, quivering more with every word he spoke. "I'm not ready for you to forget me."

"Grant," she whispered faintly.

There was a pain in his chest at the innocence of her voice. It was euphonious, like a song softly played. He knew what she had to do, and he couldn't do anything to stop her. He took a deep breath and smiled weakly as he felt his heart break. "I see the spark in you. It's wonderful. Whatever you decide to do with it, it'll be amazing."

Silence lapsed between them.

"I'm so sorry." There was a brokenness in her voice, trembling and low. "I feel it, too. I feel you fading. There's nothing I can do about it. I can't love you because you're not real," she lamented, her words decorated with shame as the weight of overwhelming guilt burdened her shoulders. She looked at him with despair hidden in her eyes as the realization of his fictional existence washed over her. "I created you, I made you up in my head to have something to distract me from reality," her voice cracked, catching in her throat, silently thanking him for everything he'd done for her as she let the realization consume her mind. "But I don't know if I need you anymore. I think I have to let you go. I'm sorry."

Her eyes closed slowly and a tear cascaded down her cheek as her stomach churned at the thought of life without him. She took a deep breath, gripping her hand into a fist against her thigh and dug her fingers into her palm, squeezing her eyes shut and reluctantly preparing herself.

She held her breath and paused before opening her eyes.

He was gone.

***The Invitation*— 3rd Place Winner**
By Lydia Woodley

Soft material moved gently with Maria as she stepped out of the armored car in front of the Mund family’s mansion. It was seemingly just another rich family’s party. She had been invited to dozens of them lately. This just happened to be the first one she accepted. Something about it seemed important. The invitation, with its bright colors and loopy font, did nothing to disperse her nerves. If anything, it just reminded her that she did not belong.

Last year, Ray Mund, the country’s biggest developer, a man Maria had never met, had died. That did not shock anyone. What did shock everyone was that Ray left most of what was in his will to one Maria Cruz. Including his stock, business shares, 75% of his wealth, and all land besides his house. Instantly, she was shoved up the social ladder to business meetings, press conferences, and attorney meetings. The press was determined to find what made her special and if not, for dirt. Maria’s whole life story was dug up and put on display. It had become miracle that she had been able to avoid any major confrontations to this point.

Well, until now.

Until now Maria swore she would never dress up for someone else unless she was being lowered in a coffin to meet God. She felt like she was being suffocated. Someone nudged her from behind, Aaron, her too muscular, robotic, esteemed bodyguard. Maria had little choice in protection, since no one wanted to work with her and risk being tied to any allegations that could be made against her. He would be a nice father figure if he knew how to smile.

“Time to go Miss.”

She sighed, “Maria, just Maria. Maybe I should start calling you Mr. Sir.”

Her dry humor did nothing to break his stoic attitude. Maria finally gave up on avoiding what awaited inside the mansion. She and Aaron converged with the others unto the backyard where the party was held. Everywhere she looked people were dancing and drinking. Aaron dropped back to stay out of sight and keep an eye on her. Turning away from Aaron, Maria plodded to the backyard. She tried to ooze confidence, but it was more like a leak from a broken pipe.

The music swayed her into movement as Maria looked for something familiar. Even she, a live wire of nerves, was not invulnerable to a good song. Walking on beat to the food table she felt a hand grip her shoulder. She whipped around and lost all words when she saw who it was.

Allie, the country’s golden girl. She was a princess to her crowds of fans but had proven to be a malevolent witch to everyone else. She had been harassing Maria for months. When she found out that her dad exempted her from his will, mayhem ensued. Lawyers were constantly calling Maria, Allie slammed her in interviews, and fans were coming to Maria’s house to berate her.

“Hey, Maria, I didn’t think you would show. You are usually busy with other things, you know, like rolling in the mud looking for someone’s life to ruin.” Allie’s eyes inspected my dress and made their way up to mine, “That is how you found that dress, right?”

“Oh Allie, it’s always such a delight to see you. I did not see on the invitation where it said to bring a bad attitude to match your fashion sense,” Maria snapped.

Allie’s eyes rolled back. “Ugh, you have an uncanny ability to give me a headache. Honey, at least be accurate. We did not even hand out invites for something small like this. Assistants handle this

type of stuff, but you wouldn't know that. Do you even know what is going on, or are you as clueless as normal?"

From the sidelines, Aaron was emerged out of his corner, making his way towards Maria. Probably with some venial excuse that gives her a reason to leave without being questioned.

Maria glanced down at her hand. The invitation was still there in glittering font, "Come join the Mund Foundation to raise money for the Animal Army." Maria's thoughts went wild. *How did I get an invitation? This is crazy. Allie was just trying to get in her head.* She looked up trying to come up with a retort, but it died on her lips when she realized Allie was gone.

Eventually Maria found herself at one of the many high-top tables set up around the venue. People were swirling around in their groups, laughing and dancing, never once getting close to Maria. People stared. Of course, they stared. She was a foreigner to them, and these types of people, the ones who always liked know what is happening and how to control it, do not like foreign.

Maria stared at her invitation, flipping it slowly over a few times trying to catch something she did not see before. She just wanted answers, and a party thrown by the Mund Foundation seemed as good as anywhere at the time. Nothing. Just a boring piece of cardstock. What a waste. This whole party was a waste.

Aaron was ready at the door as she walked towards him. Together they walked slowly to the car.

"Wait!" Someone behind them yelled as she walked down the stairs. "Stop! You can't leave yet."

A young boy in a well fitted suit was sprinting towards her. When he reached her, out of breath he started gasping out, "Why... invitation... party for you.... dad.... Are you kidding me....."?

"Whoa there, slow down kid. You've got my attention."

"I'm not a kid and you can't just leave. Not after I invited you." He stood tall; his chest puffed out as if he was trying to prove something but was not quite doing it.

The boy was barely Maria's height with acne dotting his face. He looked like he was fighting a close battle with puberty. She tried to take this in as she stared at him but still could not process what he said.

HE sent her the invitation?

"What do you mean, you sent me the invitation? I've never met you before," She answered bewildered.

"I know we haven't met before. That's why I sent you the invitation. So, we could meet. I'm Roman."

"It's nice to meet you, I guess. If we don't know each other why did you invite me?"

"You didn't know about me, but you definitely know my father and probably my sister. Ray and Allie Mund."

"But, why bring me here? Why invite me to this party and only talk to me now? Look, if this is about the will, I swear I had nothing to do with it."

"I don't care about the will. But I do want to talk to you about Dad. I think I know why he gave you everything. I was going to see you the second you came, I swear, but then I saw you talking to my sister, and I panicked. She doesn't know I invited you." Roman rubbed the back of his neck, not making eye contact with Maria.

“Why couldn’t you just call me or email me or something? Why the party?” Ramon was giving Maria the puzzle pieces, but it was like they were all for different pictures.

“You had to come to the house.” Ramon turned and headed back into the house, “Just follow me.” Maria chased after him.

Ramon led her up the stairs and down a hallway to a grand ornate bedroom. It homed a large mattress and couch. Everything was lined in a dark, sleek black. In a stark contrast to the depressing décor, bright picture frames covered the walls. The pictures were of people laughing, Allie, Roman and their dad, in different locations around the world.

Maria started, “Is this-”

“Yeah. It’s my dad’s room.” Roman was digging around under the bed. “After Dad died I kinda just got the place to myself. Allie moved out years ago, and we don’t have a mom since we were adopted by dad.”

“That must be lonely.”

“Not really. I’ve been able to explore a lot. If I didn’t start digging around, I wouldn’t have found this.” He pulled out a large box filled with journals and little keepsakes.

“What are those? His diaries?” Maria was starting to question why she followed him all this way for some old books.

“These are not just some diaries. These are dad’s travel journals. He wrote down everything in here when he went abroad. I started reading them, and well- you should read it yourself.” He flipped to a certain page and held the book out to her. With a sigh, Maria grabbed the book and started reading.

Puerto Rico, June 12, 1994

After days of business meetings, I took a trip last week to the beach for one last adventure before I returned home. On the beach I met a woman named Valeria Cruz. She swept me off my feet. She brought me all around the island. We danced and kissed and spent every moment together. She is a month pregnant with another man’s baby. A man who left her once word of a child touched his ears. I stayed on the island longer than I planned to stay with Valeria. On my last day, we made a choice. I was going to bring her to America one way or another.

Maria stared at the pages, urging them to make sense. This was about her mother, Valeria. She always spoke of home in Puerto Rico, but never of another man. Her mom told her that her dad died on the island and that is why she left.

“This doesn’t make any sense. Why wouldn’t mom tell me? She told me everything.” Roman handed her another journal. “Just read this.”

April 23, 1995

My dear Valeria and I had to leave each other after a short time in the states. There was too much press around me to risk the truth coming out about Valeria. She now lives in an industrial town in Pennsylvania. I miss her with every fiber of my being and dream of a world that is not so cruel. I check in every few months to make sure she is safe. She gave birth to a beautiful little girl named Maria. She is the same age as my Allie. Maybe someday they will be great friends. Valeria sends me pictures of Maria with some of her artwork and schoolwork. She is a talented little girl. I cannot meet her and complicate

things, but I still want her to have a chance at a beautiful life, to be full of wonder and dreams just like her mother.

“I looked into some old record books. My dad was sending payments to your mom. I think he wanted you to be the main beneficiary to his will to make up for everything he couldn’t give you before.” Roman spoke quietly as Maria began to cry.

“But what about you and your sister?”

“We still inherited a lot from Dad. Honestly, neither of us wanted to follow in Dad’s footsteps with business. Guess he thought you would do better.”

“I spent so many years alone after my mother died. I thought I’d at least knew everything about her. But, this. Why didn’t he tell me?” Her body wracked with grief.

“My dad was strange. He never gave explanations for why he did things. But there was no way he meant to hurt you. He really loved you and your mother.”

Maria’s mind swirled with the information she had learned. More than that, she thought about her future. The history between her mother and Ray was always a part of her, even when she didn’t know it. Uncovering it just illuminated a path she never saw before. A path she was determined to follow.

Grade 12 Short Story

***Evening Stock* — 1st Place Winner By Mulan Bell**

“Truth or dare,” Cassandra said.

“What,” Acacia replied.

“C’mon, truth or dare,” Cassandra pressed, shifting up onto her elbows.

They were in her bedroom. Cassandra was laying the wrong way across her bed so that she could face Acacia sitting up on the air mattress beside her. Night shrouded the room in a drowsy darkness, but Acacia hadn’t yet been able to figure out the protocol for actually going to sleep at a sleepover.

The moon was full and round outside Cassandra’s worryingly open window (she insisted she couldn’t sleep with it closed). Its pale white beams reached into the room and touched the posters above Cassandra’s bed—a view of Earth from the moon, Mae C. Jemison clad in orange, Ursa Major—and settled across her face. Her eyes shone. Her pajama top was slipping down her shoulders.

Acacia looked away. “Fine. Um, truth?”

“Okay... do you like anyone?” Cassandra said, exaggeratedly girlish.

Acacia huffed a short laugh. “No,” she said. “Truth or dare,” she continued, cutting off the other girl, who had just opened her mouth to speak.

“Dare,” Cassandra said, rolling her eyes.

“Dare,” Acacia repeated. “I dare you. . . to. . . uh. I dare you to lay upside down for the next... three rounds,” she said finally.

"Okay," said Cassandra, flipping onto her back. Her head was hanging slightly off the bed, and some of her hair fell down in rivulets around her. She folded her hands over her chest.

The moonlight was still, improbably, catching her face.

"Truth or dare," she said, grinning.

"Truth."

"Why don't you like anyone?" Cassandra asked.

"I do like people."

"You know what I mean."

". . . I can't," Acacia said.

"Why not?" Cassandra asked, and she was breaking the rules, but Acacia answered anyway.

"I'm cursed," she said plainly, without bitterness. "If I fall in love, it'll kill me, so... It's better not to think of it."

"Oh," said Cassandra to the silent room. "Oh, Cia, I'm sorry, I. . . shouldn't have asked."

"No," Acacia said, lowering her head. "It's fine."

They were asleep shortly after.

Acacia met Cassie Ibori a few weeks before their senior year, at girls' soccer tryouts. The school was small, and Cassandra had been the only girl there that no one knew.

"I'm Cassie," she'd said. "I'm from Greenbelt, across the bridge. I played over there, so hopefully I can keep up with you guys."

She could.

"You're good," Acacia said later from her place on the ground, unlacing her cleats. It was an understatement. Cassandra was the best player the team had seen in a while, and her pleased little smile said she knew it.

"Bye, Acacia," muttered Sarah W., the captain, on her way out. Acacia raised a hand in farewell, not looking up.

"Thanks," Cassandra said. "You too."

"Anyone can goalie," Acacia said quietly.

"That's not true," said Cassandra. She eyed Acacia's keys, sitting on the bench amongst her things. They were the last ones in the locker room. "Hey, do you drive? I don't have a ride for another half hour. You don't have to, obviously, but—,"

"No," Acacia said. "Um, I mean, yes. I don't mind. I can give you a ride."

"Awesome," said Cassandra with a blinding grin. "Do you mind if I call you Cia?"

Cassandra spent the day after the sleepover quietly interrogating her.

"...Where did it come from?" she said. It seemed curiosity had eschewed politeness.

"I don't remember. My mom said she made someone mad. I don't know," Acacia said under her breath, pulling on her gloves.

"And there's no cure?" Cassandra asked tentatively. "Like, true love's kiss or something...?"

"I don't know," Acacia repeated. "My mom's never said."

"You never asked?"

"It's a sensitive subject," Acacia said, and ran onto the field.

"Pick anything," Cassandra said. "I'll pay."

Acacia peered through the glass of the ice cream display. "I'll probably just get vanilla."

"What? No," said Cassandra. "You can't."

"Why not?"

"Be adventurous!" Cassandra said. "You have to expand your horizons," she added, waving her hands dramatically in front of her face.

Acacia breathed out a small laugh. "Okay, then. . . cotton candy?"

"Better," Cassandra said. "I'm getting butter pecan."

Acacia wrinkled her nose. "Is that good?"

Cassandra laughed, a full, high, happy sound. Acacia watched her for a moment, eyes drawn to the curve of her neck. She flicked her eyes back to the ice cream.

"Don't knock it 'till you try it," Cassandra said, nudging Acacia's shoulder before turning to the cashier.

Acacia felt warm.

"Sorry," Cassandra said. "We're ready to order now... "

"Mom, I'm going out to eat with Cassandra," Acacia said. Most of the girls at school and on the team used "Cassie," or sometimes "Ibori," but Acacia thought it was a waste of a pretty name. She plucked her keys up from the bowl on the kitchen counter.

Her mother glanced up from the sink. "Again?" There was something sharp in her gaze.

"...What?" Acacia said.

"You're spending a lot of time with that girl," her mother said.

"And?" Acacia said, looking away. "She's, like, my only friend."

"I don't want you too involved with her. Sarah W. 's mom told me that she's. . . well," her mother said briskly. "You need to be careful."

"I'll be fine," Acacia said, gruff. "I'm going now."

On her way out, she slammed the door harder than she meant to.

Before Acacia really understood what had happened, she was being swept into a hug.

"Oh my god!" Cassandra was shouting, swinging Acacia briefly off her feet.

The clock had ticked down to zero. Acacia's palms still buzzed from the smack of the ball against her gloved palm.

Cassandra let her go and grabbed her shoulders instead, holding her at arm's length so that they could look each other in the eyes. Cassandra's were bright and excited, scrunched into two happy half-moons.

"You won the game!" she said, before pulling Acacia back into her arms. Their teammates were swarming around them now. 1-0. Cassandra's goal and Acacia's last-minute shutout.

Dazed, Acacia raised her hands to Cassandra's back and squeezed. Her face was buried in Cassandra's shoulder, and their bodies were warm from exertion. As her teammates hugged around her and gave her slaps on the back, and as Cassandra held her tight and close, Acacia began to grin.

"What are you going to do after high school?" Cassandra asked over lunch at a café close to school. "Are you applying to colleges?"

"Yeah," Acacia said. "What about you?"

"Yeah," Cassandra parroted. "I'm studying astronomy. I'm going to walk on the moon one day," she added, leaning in close like it was a secret. "What do you want to do?"

Acacia shrugged. "Dunno."

"Really?"

"I don't think much about the future. Because of..." She waved a hand abstractly.

"Oh. But that's only if you fall in love," Cassandra said.

"Yeah," Acacia said. "But there's love at first sight, and stuff. What if I look at someone and I just..."

"That's morbid," Cassandra said quietly.

"That's life."

They went to homecoming together. Cassandra was appalled that Acacia had never been, and insisted it was mandatory for their senior year. They shopped for dresses together, and Cassandra insisted that they match. Cassandra bought a strapless A-line dress with a glittery, dark green top and a wide, black skirt. Acacia's was looser and more conservative, with a black top and a green skirt that flowed to her knees. Cassandra's mother took pictures outside Cassandra's house, and Acacia drove them to the dance.

The night was hot and frantic; Cassandra laughed her breathtaking laugh, mostly swallowed by the noise of the room, each time Acacia admitted to not knowing a popular song; Acacia spilled a cup of punch down a sophomore's tux; Cassandra taught her how to do the cha-cha slide ("the song is the instructions!"). Cassandra threw her heels into some dark corner of the decked-out cafeteria and forgot about them. Acacia shouted the words to "We Are the Champions" because no one could hear her and it made Cassandra double over with mirth.

An hour or two later, they managed to sneak out into the cafeteria's courtyard, giggling and keeping their voices soft.

Cassandra hoisted herself onto a lunch table, letting out a contented sigh. "Aren't you glad you came?"

"Okay," Acacia said. "Maybe you were right. But it's way too hot in there."

"Oh, I know. I'm glistening," Cassandra said, fanning her face. The cool breeze of the autumn night chilled the sweat beading on Acacia's arms. She awkwardly moved to sit next to Cassandra on the metal table, shivering as the cold surface met her skin. Inside, the frenetic lights of the dance beat on. The colors reached them, reflecting off Cassandra's shimmering dress top and her shining skin.

Cassandra turned her head and caught Acacia looking. Inexplicably, Acacia didn't look away. For a short eternity, they simply watched each other breathe. The bass from the dance floor pumped out a frenzied tempo through the closed doors, and it occurred to Acacia that her heart was keeping time. She could feel it pulsing in her chest. She felt lightheaded. The moonlight was hitting Cassandra's eyes again.

Cassandra looked away first. "Should we go back in? I'm getting cold, now. Someone probably stole my shoes."

Acacia realized, distantly, that her lips had parted. She cleared her throat, which felt suddenly raw. "Yeah," she said. "Let's go."

"Where are we going?" Acacia complained. "I'm exhausted."

"Coach would kill you if she heard you say that."

"She can't tell me what to do anymore."

Cassandra giggled. "Look, we're going to sit right under that tree."

When they got there, in the center of the town's little park, Cassandra tugged off the huge bag she'd brought along. From inside, she pulled out a wide blanket--checkered red and white--and a bright pink lunchbox.

"Ta-da!" she said. "A picturesque picnic. To celebrate our last game."

"I don't know if that's something to celebrate... "

"Oh, shut up. We did great."

An hour later they'd finished the sandwiches Cassandra had made, and Acacia was sprawled out in a patch of sunlight, shielding her eyes with her hand.

"Here," Cassandra said, nudging for Acacia to lift her head. Acacia obliged her, and Cassandra maneuvered the other girl until she was resting her head in Cassandra's lap. "There you go."

Acacia gazed up at Cassandra's face. Her throat felt tight.

"I'm tired," she said.

"Sleep, then," Cassandra replied. "I don't mind. I'll still be here when you wake up."

Her smile was teasing. Something in Acacia's chest stretched taut.

Oh, she thought.

The sun shone high in the sky; the light dappled across their skin by the leaves of the elegant tree which sheltered them. The world seemed suddenly painted in golden hues and narrowed down to this single moment. A playful wind stroked their faces and tossed an errant strand of hair across Acacia's forehead. Cassandra reached down absentmindedly and brushed it away.

"Okay," said Acacia, soft.

There were worse ways to die. There, warm in the lap of the girl she had foolishly let herself love, she felt nearly content.

She fell asleep.

There were hands at her shoulders.

Her eyes fluttered open and she gasped at the shock of it. She sat up and the sleep cleared from her vision, revealing the park around her. Hands gripped her arms and spun her—she found herself staring into Cassandra's rich, panicked brown eyes.

"Cia! Oh, thank god, you got so still and I thought—»

"I'm alive."

"What?"

"I'm. . . not dead," Acacia said, awed.

"No, obviously, but 1—" Cassandra stopped herself, and the realization crept across her face like a spell cast.

"I'm in love with you," Acacia blurted. "I'm in love with you, and I'm not dead."

Cassandra's face melted into something fond and soft, tension falling from her shoulders.

One of her hands, loose on Acacia's elbow, trailed down to lightly touch Acacia's palm.

And life went on.

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!
- ❖ We want to thank our guest author, Claudia Friddell for joining us as a part of our celebration of young authors. A former elementary school teacher, Claudia loves talking to students and teachers about the magic of bringing history to life through books. For Claudia, the next best thing to time travel is discovering and sharing exciting real-life stories from long ago. When she’s not visiting schools, digging for treasure in the library, or writing at her home in Baltimore, she’s reading, walking, and kayaking on Maryland’s Eastern Shore. To learn more about Claudia and her books, *George Washington’s Spies*, *Goliath*, *Hero of the Great Baltimore Fire*, and her upcoming book, *Saving Lady Liberty*, log onto www.claudiafriddell.com.
- ❖ 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 Shore 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/>.