

# BEST TEEN **WRITING** 2021



**Scholastic  
Art & Writing  
Awards**

Alliance for  
Young Artists  
& Writers

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# Dedication

*Best Teen Writing 2021* is dedicated to Dr. Hugh Roome, the current chairman and a long-time member of the board of directors of the Alliance for Young Artists & Writers. Dr. Roome worked at Scholastic Inc. for 30 years in various roles, including president of Scholastic International. In his tenure at the company, Dr. Roome promoted literacy and the passion for knowledge, expanded learning and reading resources across the globe, and advocated for the importance of civic knowledge and duties to students and educators nationwide. In addition to publishing 30 magazines and various book imprints, he is also an author of books and biographies for children, a recipient of the Lamplighter Award in educational publishing, and an inductee of the Association of American Publishers' Hall of Fame. Through his generosity, the Alliance annually bestows the Roome Fund Gold Art Portfolio Award and Scholarship to one student with extraordinary talent, vision, and dedication to an art discipline.

# About *Best Teen Writing 2021*

*Best Teen Writing 2021* features selected National Medal-winning work from the 2021 Scholastic Art & Writing Awards. Since 1923, the Awards, presented by the Alliance for Young Artists & Writers, have identified teenagers with exceptional artistic and literary talent. The program celebrates these young artists and writers with opportunities for recognition, exhibition, publication, and scholarships.

This year, while the world was being upended by COVID-19 and our country reckoned with calls for social and racial justice, nearly 600 works received National Medals in writing categories. The selections for this publication represent the broad range of work that received National Medals from the perspective of grade, geography, genre, and subject matter. They also present a spectrum of the insight and creative intellect that inform many of the submitted pieces.

Visit **[artandwriting.org](https://artandwriting.org)** to view online galleries of all nationally awarded works of art and writing. There you can also learn how to enter the 2022 Awards and ways to partner with the Alliance to support young artists and writers in your community.

# About the Scholastic Art & Writing Awards

Since 1923, the Scholastic Art & Writing Awards have recognized the vision, ingenuity, and talent of our nation's youth and provided opportunities for creative teens to be celebrated. Each year, thousands of teens participate in the program and become a part of our community—young artists and writers, filmmakers and photographers, poets and sculptors, illustrators and science fiction writers—along with countless educators who support and encourage the creative process. Notable Awards alumni include Tschabalala Self, Stephen King, Kay WalkingStick, Charles White, Joyce Carol Oates, and Andy Warhol—to name just a few.

## Our Mission

The Scholastic Art & Writing Awards are presented by the Alliance for Young Artists & Writers. The Alliance is a 501(c)(3) nonprofit organization whose mission is to identify students with exceptional artistic and literary talent and present their remarkable work to the world through the Awards. The Awards give students opportunities for recognition, exhibition, publication, and scholarships. During our 2021 program year, students across America submitted nearly 230,000 original works across 28 different categories of art and writing.

## Our Programs

Through the Awards, teens in grades 7–12 from public, private, or home schools can submit pieces in 28 categories of art and writing for a chance to earn recognition and scholarships, and to have their works exhibited and published. Beyond the Awards, the Alliance produces a number of programs to support creative students and their educators, including the Art.Write.Now.Tour, the National Student Poets Program, the Scholastic Awards Summer Workshops and Scholastic Awards Summer Scholarships programs, the GOLDEN Educators Residency, the Writers Retreat for Educators, and many more. The Alliance features artworks by National Medalists who received our top awards in *Best Teen Art*. Additionally, we publish a collection of exemplary written works in our anthology, *Best Teen Writing*, and a chapbook that features works from the National Student Poets. These publications are distributed free of charge to schools, students, educators, museums, libraries, and arts organizations across the country. The Alliance also supports its Awards alumni by providing career development and networking opportunities.

# 2021 National Writing Jurors

Rasha Abdulhadi	Mary Chan	Dina Ginzburg
Ingrid Accardi	Georgia Christgau	Erin Granuzzo
Nicole Adduci	Justine Ciovacco	Chrisanne Grisé
Irvin Ajes	Alicia Clark	Jennifer Hackett
Rommel Alama	Cheryl Clark	Monique Hall
Bianca Alexis	Danielle Joanne Clayton	Vanessa Han
Yasmine Ameli	Melissa Coffey	Daniel Handler
Kristen Anderson	Gerald L. Coleman	Tiffany Hanks
Alison Angell	Tiffany Colon	Jess Harold
Rayshma Arjune	Dennis Condon	Betty Harris
Jasmine Bager	Jody Corbett	Lynn Harris
Jennifer Barrett	Talia Cowen	Lyndi Hart
Shyla Bass	Bridgette Craft	Hastings Hensel
Linda Beede	Jessica Crowley	Geoff Herbach
Denise Beiler	Taylor Crumpton	Jana Herko
Andrew Bencel	Shelby Curran	Nicole Hocutt
Rebecca Benett	Yrsa Daley-Ward	Susanna Horng
Danielle Bennett	Teri Ellen Cross Davis	Jenny Huang
Joshua Bennett	Redina Demushi	Joselia Rebekah Hughes
Rebecca Berger	Kendra Dennis	Andrew Dana Hudson
Zoe Berman	Trace Howard DePass	Joyce Jamerson
Cassandra Bervaldi	Jennifer Dignan	Margaret Janik
Eric Black	Deborah Dinger	Syan Jay
Sandra Blanchette	Ann Dixon	Adriene Jenik
Tracy Bozentka	Celeste Doaks	Brooks Jewell
Lauren Brecheisen	Whitney Dobladdillo	Stephanie Jones
Denise Brickler	Crystal Dolon	Zachary Jones
Traci Brimhall	Terry Donner	Natnaree Junboonta
Joan Brookbank	Tyler Dunlap	John Kahlke
Camryn Bruno	Meg Dyal	Aryaana Kahn
Francesca Bueti	Merrianne Dyer	Shir Kehila
Latisha Burgos	Allison Dykeman	Andrea Kerperin
Carmen Burks	Velimir Efremovski	Laleh Khadivi
Mallory Butler	David Ehmcke	Angel Kimble
Doan Buu	Calyssa Erb	Julie Knehans
Carrie Cabral	Jeanette Ferrara	Janet Konstant
Rochelle Camhi	Noreen Figueroa	Jordana Kulak
Helen Canales	Katherine Forester	Ellen Ladd
Chris Carey	Willetta Frizzle	Sabrina Lam
Caela Carter	Stephanie Gadlin	Thomas Lambiase
Jessica Chambers	Mary Kate Garmire	Devi S. Laskar
Irene Chan		

Sokie Lee  
Lisa Levy  
Su-Yee Lin  
Alexa Logush  
Michelle Lombaerde  
Frank Loose  
Abhishek Loya  
Shiran Lugashi  
Laura Lundgren  
Theresa Lusby  
Kelly Mabie  
Maral Maclagan  
Loreen Mall  
Kim Marron  
Tom Martinez  
Raisa Masood  
Rachel Mazza  
Laura McManus  
Thomas McNulty  
Melissa Miles  
Jessica Moon  
Tracie Morris  
Vynetta Morrow  
Lauren Moschel  
Daniel Moser  
Da'Shawn Mosley  
Amber Mueggenberg  
Willetta Muhammad  
Nikki Mutch  
Grace Myers  
An Na  
Rhonda Neal-Waltman  
Kailey Netter  
Kerry Neville  
Susan Nixon  
Linda Novak  
Jenna O'Donoghue  
Toni Olsen  
Martins Omidire  
Claribel Ortega  
Anne Marie Pace  
Stephanie Pan  
Elsbeth Pancrazi

Doug Patterson  
Erin Paxinos  
Megan Peace  
Alana Pedalino  
Chrisanne Peloquin  
Shannon Pender  
Sophia Pestun  
Jennifer Piergentile  
Rachel Prater  
Michael Premo  
Joy Priest  
Alice Quinn-Makwaia  
Elsa Reyes  
L.A. Roberts  
Danielle Robertson  
Mary F. Roma  
Jessica Romeo  
Shelly Romero  
Judith Rose  
Andrea Ruelle  
Lois Safrani  
Margarita Saieh  
Joseph Schieber  
Aubrey Schrader  
Eileen Secchi  
Jen Seewagen  
Max Sexton  
Claudia Shaleesh  
Lori Shaner  
Taheerah Skyles  
Noor Unnahr Siddique  
Amanda Smith  
Kaitlynn Smith  
Terribeth Smith  
Nzinga Speller-Muhammad  
Kristin Standley  
Anna Stout  
Erin Swavely  
Lisa Tannenbaum  
Kimberly Taylor  
Emily Teresa  
Larry Thomas, Jr.  
Paul Tobin

Laura Tohe  
Jia Tolentino  
Katy D. Towell  
Vu Hoang Tran  
Justine Tupe  
Brian Turner  
Paul Tutrone  
Dwaign Tyndal  
Derek Updegraff  
Anne Ursu  
Mariam Vahradyan  
Olivia Valcarce  
Alissa Valiante  
Ava Vitali  
Matthew Vollmer  
Asiya Wadud  
Morgan Walker  
Gail Ward  
Jessica Warren  
Catherine Weening  
Ross Welford  
Brian Phillip Whalen  
John Corey Whaley  
Elizabeth Whiting  
Aaron Wiener  
Crystal Wilkinson  
Becky Williams  
Carter Wilson  
Alex Winnick  
Valerie Wire  
Olivia Wolfgang-Smith  
Carmin Wong  
Tim Wynne-Jones  
Andy Yablin  
Danielle Yadao  
Kobi Yamada  
Jerusha Saldana Yanez  
Stephanie Yang  
Yanyi  
Lizzy Yoder  
Sarah Zercher  
Alexei Zoubine  
Meg Zukin

# Foreword

This has been a year without precedent in the nearly 100-year history of the Scholastic Art & Writing Awards. We are honored to share this collection of written works that received National Medals in this year's Awards. This book celebrates the creative accomplishments of a group of exceptional teens who are part of a tradition that dates back to 1923—one focused on recognizing young people who represent the future of American art and letters. Now more than ever, the bold, unique visions celebrated through this program inspire us and give us hope.

On behalf of the entire Awards family, we congratulate all of this year's Medalists. We would also like to acknowledge the extraordinary educators and supportive family members who have helped to nurture the voices and visions expressed in this work.

Presented for more than a quarter century by the Alliance for Young Artists & Writers, the Awards have grown to become the country's largest, longest-running, and most prestigious recognition program for creative teens. This is possible only because of our dedicated Affiliate Partners, which oversee approximately 100 regional programs across the nation; our expert jurors at both the regional and national levels; and our generous supporters. And of course, none of our programs would exist without the leadership of our board of directors and the yearlong efforts of our exceptional staff. Despite the incredible challenges posed by the pandemic, the Awards community has been resilient. We are grateful to these extraordinary individuals and institutions for all they do to support our shared mission.



**Dr. Hugh Roome**

Chairman of the Board

Alliance for Young Artists & Writers



**Christopher Wisniewski**

Executive Director

Alliance for Young Artists & Writers

# Awards with Scholarships

Political commentaries and civic engagement. Climate change. Love and loss. Teens have a lot to say about life and the world around them. Every year, we partner with dedicated individuals, foundations, and corporations to offer creative scholarship opportunities to teen artists and writers whose experiences and ideas help shape the communities around them.

## **Portfolio Awards**

- Gold Medal Portfolio
- Silver Medal with Distinction Portfolio

## **Other Special Achievement Awards**

- Best-in-Grade Award
- Civic Expression Award
- New York Life Award
- One Earth Award
- Ray Bradbury Award for Science Fiction & Fantasy

Selections of awarded writing works are included in the following pages.



**Caroline Dinh**, Grade 12, Richard Montgomery High School, Rockville, MD. Bonnie Peyer, *Educator*; Writopia Lab, *Affiliate*.  
**Gold Medal Portfolio**

**Salesforce Writing Portfolio**

# computer

## POETRY

/kəm'pyōdər/

*noun*

- she who computes.
- she who flexes her fine fingers and steps up to  
tame the wild machine.
- she who weaves wires into electric quilts of capability. calculator  
cog woman. punch card priestess. poetess  
of bits and binary.
- she who spins stories out of circuitry.
- she who solders soldiers that match the might of man,
  - she who, like a mother, combs through switches and wires,  
mining lice from her child's hair, debugging.
- she who writes books that move men to the moon,  
piled up in her own paper rocketship. claim your place  
in the stars. future first women on mars will follow your  
sharp footsteps, slick heels,
- she who cooks the best meals.
  - she who cleans homes and cares for the children,
    - who pioneers by day and patches  
ripped jeans by night. programming  
is as intricate as crochet, in a way; programming  
requires the sharp eye of

- she who scrubs every smudge and  
    irons every crease and  
        arranges every portrait on the wall.  
        programming is for her.

*(archaic)*

you were crowned queens of computing before you succumbed to the shadows.  
    you died forgotten empresses, female pharaohs: mummified in  
black-and-white snapshots, and when programmers forgot how to wear skirts,  
history forgot who you were.

    they buried you in unmarked graves for us dreamer girls to dig up:  
dreamer girls in a world where every search spans a snap and every library  
lingers one finger tap away and every database, every dictionary  
displays at the drag of a key. and yet all we find when we search for  
your names is this obsolete entry and your snapshot sarcophagi and your  
headstones heralded by dust.

        and we brush away the cobwebs.

        and we read aloud your names ■



**Grace Gomez-Palacio**, Grade 12, David H. Hickman High School, Columbia, MO. Nancy White, *Educator*; Greater Kansas City Writing Project, *Affiliate*. **Gold Medal Portfolio**

The Harry and Betty Quadracci Writing Portfolio

## remember me after i die as a girl who was careful with candles

### POETRY

i.

all i do is write in lowercase and wish i spoke spanish.

proper spanish too, not the textbook kind, not the shit that gave me the highest score on the ap test, but the kind with slang and stories and little tiny mirrors propping open the faces of all the real mexicans i've ever met.

i upturn my hands and braise them in marigold petals, i offer you conchas and sopa de frijoles negros and polmorones, i burnish under the summer sun and tell myself i will earn it.

i think of a world where my dad kept the accent in our apellido, kept it hard for my school teachers to say aloud, kept it special and syllable-rich, but i can't, exactly, blame him for changing it.

i see what they say about people like my grandfather on the news.

even so, even yet, hyphenated and hobbled, i fell in love with the way my chilean coworker read it aloud from my nametag. it resonated on the insides of my ribs, her lips over my name like that.

*where are you from?*

let me stumble to explain to you, please. allow me to try and confess myself. and when i do—

when i do, i will gentle my hands against the curves of our ofrenda, and i will ask my grandmother to forgive me, to encircle my arms wrist to shoulder in ghostly glamour.

i alight and arrive and i do not spare a single drop; the countertop glows with wax-furbished light and someone, somewhere, is at least a little bit proud.

maybe this, here, this sting of unsent emails that eases under the eyes of spirits i don't believe in, maybe this is why i have to keep churning out blood cells and book bindings from the marrow in my bonestuff. maybe it's because i'm going to paint our house robin's egg blue, and dissolve it in illumination at the beginning of november, and someday i want someone to do the same for me. maybe it's not about the spanish and the *pan de muerto* and the postcards she sent me from italy.

maybe, maybe—

it's about fire.

it's about the cautious cremation of the wick, the slender balance of fragrance and fraudulence.

it's about smothering the smoke before it spreads, preserving your capillaries in amber.

it's about the melting and the catching and the crying-behind-your-hand type of summers.

plead your praying hands into the hollows of a record player, and

remember me after i die as a girl who was careful with candles.

ii.

all i do is wear headphones and pretend i know how to draw.

real life drawings, too, the kind that i would show off in math class to the girl who sat next to me, the kind i sketched on the inside of a cardboard coffee cup sleeve and a girl i never met told me it was beautiful.

i think i could do it.

i think i could feed my statistics homework to the things in my fish tank and draw people that don't exist until the bones of my fingers mangle and subside.

i wear headphones, foam over ears over skull, and the volume of flight seems something reachable. press it higher. press it higher. press it—

music and music and misery, i inhale fermatas of college town air, of oxygen recycled and rebuffed and reorganized into the bureaucracy of my lungs. i pull seashells from bookshelves and grind them into something like sugar, or diamonds. i tangle my fingers into the hair of a bowstring. i bedazzle the ceiling with pomegranate seeds. i steep the ashes of your love letters into a tea and honey myself on the tongue of their incredulity.

*where are you from?*

this, i want to say, helplessly. radio dials and ipod-camera shutters and the shape of optimism played easy on guitar. more than that. less.

the sun sets as though it is painting its nails and i draw it the way a person asks for permission.

there is a brush of thumbpads on plastic where buttons are pressed, and  
playlists are wrung out like laundry, over and over and over. there is a flash of  
a match and my window ignites. the room wisps with lavender-scented smog  
and the house does not burn down.

let me request this. just this once.

beg of me my conscience, and

remember me after i die as a girl who was careful with candles.

iii.

all i do is wake up and wear boy clothes like it means something.

cliché, whisper the tags that read *mens*, the threads of polyester that make the  
shape of my hips something shameful. pronouns and pyres, lamplight in the  
morning and bread stacked into monuments—religion looks a little bit like a  
woman,

and a little bit like a crown.

to worship and wonder in equal, opposite measure, to devote myself to  
something other than the shadow of her, to walk myself backwards into hell  
holding her hand, to sing in the kitchen at breakfast.

i sleep in a safety that yearns to be broken.

*where are you from?*

anywhere. somewhere with a ceiling i can paint on and houseplants that are  
more immortal than your breath. a place and a person and the sensation  
of kissing someone and feeling *right*, from the only way i knew the other  
answers were wrong, before.

let me type this.

push me by the shoulders to knock on god's favorite little door, tell me to  
hand over this sheaf of paper that spit itself reluctantly from the dregs of my  
typewriter's last ink ribbon, and i'll do it. i will.

i will boil the water on the stove and vacuum the carpet into nothing, i will  
dust the mantle free of its gravity and smash the porcelain disappointment of  
a girl who thought she had to marry a prince into memory.

i'll yank collars out-and-over crewneck sweaters in the mirror, and pray to  
the glass that i am beautiful, i will roll the word handsome on the back of my  
tongue and it will taste like anticipation.

my head fills with wedding dresses.

my fingertips catch on the pull of the lighter, but i do not falter, the flame  
wavers and wilts and regrets. i stand there, surrounded, unknown, remade,  
pre-loved, and embering away into captive bred starlight.

tell your grandkids about me, about my words and my eyes and my bloody

little heart.

please, remember me after i die.

and, when you do,

remember me after i die as a girl who was careful with candles. ■



**Yasmeen Jaaber**, Grade 12, Appomattox Regional Governor's School, Chesterfield, VA. Cindy Cunningham, *Educator*; Visual Arts Center of Richmond, *Affiliate*. **Gold Medal Portfolio**

The New York Times Writing Portfolio

# A Muslim Girl's Guide to Life's Big Changes

PERSONAL ESSAY & MEMOIR

## 1. Hijab (Hee-JAAB)

[What's that called again?

Oh, Hijab!

or Khimar

you can just say Hijab though.

Hee-jawb?

Yeah, you got it.]

Everyone will pick apart the pieces of you that are hardly understood within your own head and heart. Pretend to know less than you do, and pretend that it's too complicated for them to comprehend. Have them trip in your trap, it's hardly their business anyhow.

[Do you have cancer? Marcus asks me, with his mohawk and his mucus voice. Fourth grade. I'm trying not to cry. He's taller than me and I don't like crying underneath people. The tears I'm holding back begin to boil. I do not have cancer, that's really stupid to say. I stomp my boots into the dusty mulch. My friends back me up. God, Marcus, don't be an idiot. Jeez, I didn't know! What is it for if she doesn't have cancer?]

Say: religious purposes. Fourth grade, you don't really know what you're wearing it for. But, it definitely means you're Muslim. Religious purposes is the way

to go. It's to the point, and leaves little room for questioning.

[Oh you're like one of those mooz-lems? Do you have to wear that?]

They always know more than they let on. Don't falter, walk away with your head high and your stomach hurting. Eventually, you'll run out of the energy it takes to stand up for yourself.

## 2. Prayer

[Is there a space for Aliyah to pray?

She can go to a teacher with a planning block.

Is there any place she could be alone?

Let me ask.

Unfortunately, we don't have a room for Aliyah to pray here.

Oh, okay. Thank you for asking.]

Pray during Ramadan to pass the time. Pray when your dad is in a bad mood and you want to see him happy. Pray when someone dies. Pray so that the ground shivers and the canyon between you and Islam fills up with a few tiny pebbles. At this rate, it will take an entire lifetime to close the gap and make your way across.

[I am crouching underneath the computer table, reading Maximum Ride fan-fiction. In this one, written by chronicyouth.2003, Max has postponed sex with Fang because she's gotten her period. I'm jealous of her, a fictionalized version of an already fictional character. She has an idealistic life to me, a bookish sixth grader. 'Sorry hot-winged boyfriend, I can't have sex with you, I'm on my period!'. Was that what life was like when you had your period?]

You forget how to make Wuḍū every time you decide to pray. But, you always remember that you've got to rinse your mouth and your feet. Close the door if you don't think you can do it correctly, that way nobody can see if you're doing it wrong. Stick your hand in warm flowing water, and splash it on your face. Rub your arms and your neck and breathe the water into your nose. If the drop-lets of water on your face are visible, nobody will know the difference.

[So I press my eyes tightly together, and clutch my Nexus tablet to my chest and pray in the way they do in movies. I never pray this way, knees bent and

eyes closed and thinking only of myself. Please let me get my period. Please, please, please.]

You like the way the prayer rug smells. You push against the smooth layering of suede. Your dad is singing the call to prayer, and you echo it in your own head. I could do that, you think. How come he's the only one who gets to call the Adhan.

[The next day, I am crying over my brown-stained underwear. It's not glorious or sexy. I don't feel any closer to a life of hot avian spouses. I'm not even completely sure that it's my period, but I go into my suitcase from camp and grab a pad anyways. It's not as comfortable as the panty-liners the nurse gave all the girls in fourth grade. It's actually not comfortable at all. This sucks, I say to myself, why did I want this so badly?]

### 3. Faith

[Everyone in here is a believer of Allah  
Takbīr

Allahu akbar

Takbīr

Allahu akbar

At least I hope we all are]

You are going to make friends that don't want you to be who you are. You are going to decide you don't want to be who you are either. Christians don't have to cover up, you'll think. Christians are allowed Santa Clause and pork-fat gummy bears. Christians wear short-shorts and crop tops and braid each other's hair during class.

[I hate having something particular to say to someone. It sits in my belly and writhes around and I know it's in there so what does it have to make such a ruckus about?]

You ask your newest friend if she believes in God. She laughs. The word atheist feels like a breath of fresh air. How freeing would that be? you'll say to yourself. To have no responsibilities except to live and to die. Lean into your hidden desire and taste those new ideas of liberation. They will spread across your tongue and melt into tangy discomfort.

[I climb into the front seat and shut the door. It's dark outside and all I'm thinking about is the fact that I've never been grocery shopping this late. My mom had asked me if I wanted to go and the creature in my stomach said yes. There was only one way to kill it.]

You'll feel more disconnected to Islam than you've ever felt, you'll feel repulsed by it. You'll find yourself thinking "fuck God" and then you'll find yourself ashamed of it. You will tell your friends you don't believe in God. They laugh. Well then, if you don't believe in God, what are you doing with that on? What's that called again?

[In the aisle with the canned beans, I tell my mom I don't believe in God. In the aisle with the canned beans, my mom looks at me with only fear. It's quiet. There's a book about prophet Muhammed on my desk the next morning. I don't read it.]

You'll want to be like everyone else, because there is no value in who you are right now. There is no value in Islam. The ground rumbles this time and brings down red clouds and boulders and coyotes and tarantulas. You stand below it all, letting your whole life fall around you, sand cutting your lifted face.

As things move and crumble you have to stay strong, and put your trust in Allah. Stop wanting so goddamn much, some things you just cannot have. Put your trust in Allah alayhi s-salām. ■



**Tyler Kellogg**, Grade 12, Governor's School for the Arts & Humanities, Greenville, SC. Scott Gould, *Educator*; Region-at-Large, *Affiliate*. **Gold Medal Portfolio**

**The Cora Bidwell Writing Portfolio**

## Lies, etc.

### PERSONAL ESSAY & MEMOIR

*1. "You can't make a profit without property."*

I learned to read by naming the properties I aspired to own: New York, Baltic, States Avenue (the cheaper ones), then gradually the ones my tongue faltered on, the ones that, no matter what I rolled, always eluded me: Marvin Gardens, Ventnor, and Pacific Avenues. My father taught me to be, above everything else, money hungry.

I was six years old when I first won Monopoly, sitting on my father's lap. He leaned in after I collected all the orange properties, his salt and ginger Vandyke beard scratching my ears: *Pay attention, son, this is where it gets good.*

I began slowly collecting green, blue, and purple paper tribute from my brothers. Turn after turn, they dropped their forest-colored houses into my chubby palm, drawing back quickly, fearing I might snatch their hands from them in my blind capitalist conquest. My father watched, belly-laughing and scratching his neck stubble, taunting my brothers: You're gonna let the baby beat you?

I focused on the words beat you. I was being cutthroat, which my father loved. He was traditional that way. A man of blood and sweat and hard work. I was a boy who poured through atlases in my free time and regularly hummed the *Curious George* film soundtrack as I cooked dinner with my mother. But when it came to Monopoly, I took after my father, throwing my arms up in brazen anger and raising my pip-squeak voice when a rule was flaunted.

I like to think my bullish, piercing gaze made my brothers fold their properties facedown, displaying the bronze words MORTGAGED for all to see. I snorted in my brothers' face and flicked their pieces to the carpet when they offered get-out-of-jail-free cards after an expensive visit to one of my sprawling,

scenic, blood-red estates. The sports car, the top hat, the boot, the thimble, all met the same shameful fate by my finger.

Eight years later, my father had trouble refinancing his office park in south-east Charlotte. His office park wasn't anything spectacular: a few beige concrete buildings with black windows, cracked parking lots, and poorly kept shrubbery. No brilliant hues of the miniature plastic hotels and houses I grew up with.

He was away from home for three weeks courting investors, treating them to authentic baklava in a diner called the Landmark (once visited by Guy Fieri himself), while my mother and I passed the days lumbering between our patio and our dock, taking catnaps and cutting through pontoon wakes, unaware my father was staring down men in blazers. Men aching to flick my father to the carpet.

He'd tear down the drywall on the second floor and make a bigger break room. He'd rid the air vents of dead squirrels. He offered to update the carpet, if they'd just let him play the game a little longer. But these men had heard it all before—the middle-aged father pleading, promising anything, in exchange for a little more time to turn the place around. These men did not come to wheel and deal, to let my father pass go.

*2. "Don't worry son, nothing's gonna change."*

After two or three months of my father failing to pay back the mortgage on our house, the bank foreclosed on the property, and we moved to Salem, a town on the muddier side of the lake just south of the Duke Energy nuclear power plant. Our new backyard ended in a mulch cliff. It felt like a trap, like the jagged earth was rising from the frigid water to swallow me whole. Unlike my old backyard, there were no cool moss patches or freshly laid straw upon which I might lounge. The house appeared gaunt and narrow and short, like some poor Victorian child battling malaria. The smell of mildew clung to everything. Shirts, dogs, food. The oak trees drummed on my window at three a.m. (most likely summoning something), whereas the pines at my previous house respected my privacy. A painting hung across from my bed picturing a girl, arms draped over the balcony of a garden gazebo, remaining idle during the day and coming to life once I turned off the lights, hopping towards the edge of the frame, giggling from lily to lily. On numerous occasions I woke to the the oatmeal coat of my walls, the navy threads of my bedsheets, the arms and neck of the porcelain girl in the painting tinted green, as if some spirit forced soul-sucking night-vision goggles on me during my sleep as a reminder I was infringing upon an already ghost-occupied home. *At least rent's paid*, my father joked, glancing at me, then the girl in the painting, who did not laugh.

After a six-month stint there, we moved again, leaving without a look back from our car seats. The new house was once owned by my grand-uncle, a man who worked for my father before he suffered a fatal stroke while chainsawing a tree in his backyard at midnight. If the house in Salem had a semblance of grace, our new house had no manners and never attempted to welcome us. The house was located in Easley, between a MetroPCS and a closed Stop-A-Minit. Confederate memorabilia and University of Kentucky wall decals decorated the house, casting an aggressive blue about the place. Cockroaches walked among us, and no matter how many my dog and I squashed, squished, drew and quartered, they kept coming back. *What a great place to land*, my father said.

3. *"I'll know more in the coming weeks."*

My father bought a plot of land near Boone before the recession, before he lost his job and started spending his days deceiving his children. He planned to build a house on that plot after my brothers and I graduated and went off to college. He constantly talked about the mountains. He loved imagining himself picking out blackberry jams from the markets on Poplar Grove during summer, trying on the finest plaid flannels from the Mast General Store during fall, spending his day simmering in a hot tub, drifting back and forth, during winter.

We visited the property every so often, my father tramping over holly shrubs, making sweeping motions with his hands, asking us to imagine the house, the glowing furnace with real wood, the patio where we'd play chess on lazy Sundays (and maybe smoke a cigar with him once we were old enough), the living room with the glass coffee table, perfect for a game of Monopoly. My brothers and I imagined the backyard, a forest that allowed us to pretend we were Daniel Boone, raccoon cap pulled tight over our bowl cuts, pump-action pellet gun pressed to our chests.

My father never had a boss. He was always self-employed, always the one to huff coffee-breath down others' necks. At the age of twenty my father owned and operated his own business toting Atari gaming systems around Gainesville, Florida, in the back of his white pickup for delivery to frat houses. By the time he reached thirty, he abandoned Pac-Man (for better or worse) in pursuit of small, molding office parks.

Once my father lost his office parks, he became certain the only way back to baklava and tailored blazers was to sell his mountain property. He refused to get a job. Working for somebody else was not an option. The money would come. He tried convincing us it'll all work itself out, it usually does. What "it" was, I'm still not entirely sure.

Meanwhile the boat and jet skis sold, the golf membership expired, and bills accumulated. The car was parked in the driveway one day, in a compound the next. Leftovers lasted us longer. Showers and electricity came and went. My father grew his hair out, sat on the couch, and prayed more. I quit the track team, got a job scooping ice cream, hoping maybe he'd know more about the property, or whatever the hell "it" was, today, tomorrow. At least by the end of the month.

#### 4. *"I must've misplaced my watch."*

I heard my father sold his watch to pay for groceries the other day. *I'll check his wrist the next time I see him*, I thought. Maybe when he asks for a hug. Maybe when he reaches for one of his stemless wine glasses with the words "Cobalt Boats" stamped on the side. I'll let him open the fridge and point at the dark cherries (Great Value), the cottage cheese (Breakstone's, slightly more expensive, but worth every penny, according to my father), the bagels (Thomas, blueberry, on sale), and then I'll pop the question: *Where's your watch?* He'll slap his wrist (partly in an attempt to pull the wool over my eyes and partly because he forgot he really *did* sell his watch). He'll walk around the kitchen and say *I must've misplaced my watch*.

Before the watch, my father sold his iPad, which, I'm told, got him a bag or two of green grapes (Sun World). I'm not sure what all he's sold, but the last time I visited my father, the walls seemed a little more bare, my father's closet appeared smaller, as if he were missing a pair or three of shoes, and my bookshelf bore half the books it used to. (Notably missing was my collection of Rick Riordan's work, including *Percy Jackson*, *The Heroes of Olympus*, and *The Kane Chronicles*, which I begged my father to buy me for my eleventh birthday).

#### 5. *"I'll be there."*

My grandfather's funeral was held in my grandparents' backyard. The day before the funeral I Windexed every window, picked spider webs and dead snails out of every screen door, power-washed every wooden porch, scrubbed every door and chair, and bleached every cooler in that damn house. (I was also in charge of setting up the tiki torches and arranging fold-out chairs in the driveway for the guests).

I heard my grandfather's buddies play taps the next day. I watched as my grandmother was presented with my grandfather's flag, folded in a triangle and stuck in a glass case. I shared the stories I knew of my grandfather: him evading Franco's fighter pilots in the Strait of Gibraltar; him throwing my mother into a bull-shark-infested river to fetch the grill that slid off his sailboat; and

years later, him sitting on the couch, watching Fox News for hours. The time my grandfather picked me up from surgery when I was eight years old, because my father stayed at the office to hold a conference call with his business partners, even though he said he'd meet me in the waiting room and take me to get Marble Slab afterwards.

At the funeral, my relatives (plus a few family friends who I met when I couldn't yet walk or form sentences, much less remember faces) asked me why my father wasn't there. They approached me when I was stuffing my face with brie and pita. When I came out of the bathroom and as I snooped around the alcohol, there they were. Patiently waiting. They looked at me like I was a stray who yapped and whined if you got too close. They looked like they wanted to pet me, to offer warmest sympathies, but did not want to toss me a slab of meat, for fear I might get attached, that I might follow them home and appear at their doorstep, night after night, begging for scraps, for a place to yap and whine about my father.

I waited for him, sat in the fold-out chairs and stared up at the gray clouds whisking themselves into a thunderstorm. I pretended I expected him not to show: a shoulder shrug, a *That's my father for you.* ■



**Keerthi Lakshmanan**, Grade 12, Cupertino High School,  
Cupertino, CA. Christina Masuda, *Educator*; Writopia Lab,  
*Affiliate*. **Gold Medal Portfolio**

**The Harry and Betty Quadracci Writing Portfolio**

# Nameless

## FLASH FICTION

There is a rule, across the sea where I was born. Ma explained it to me. It goes like this: *Never give them the extent of your name, the length of it, its shape or size or hue—for then they will steal it, and you will forget its sound on your tongue.*

\* \* \*

My mother has yet to become accustomed to this country. She whiles away the days in the streets, turning her nose up at the smell of coal and cobblestone.

I don't have the time or desire to take after Ma's habits! But our neighbors may have rightly labeled me a headcase by now; I stay indoors and paint from dusk until dawn. We have been here a month and I've kept to myself. I am certain at some point I will have to meet these people in order to sell my paintings, but I refuse to until my work is perfection.

Imagine their faces! *How beautiful*, they will say, looking upon my handiwork, *this is true art*. Lately I can dream of nothing other than recognition and fortune here. Ma named me "fame" in our language, and at last it feels like I have found the land where that may be reality.

I'm running low on supplies. I should have to take a trip after all, and buy better paints. Mine are from across the sea. They don't dry well in this new climate.

\* \* \*

I have gotten my paints. The man at the shop was certainly handsome! He had hair like cornsilk and eyes of ice, but when I inquired after a set of paints he only smiled and asked if that was what I really wanted.

"I can make your dreams come true, did you know?" said he. "That people sail oceans for my promises?"

He looked quite attractive as he told me so. Carefully, I asked, "Then can you make me famous?"

“Yes. I can make them love you,” said he, in his pretty, accent-free voice. “I can make them need you. In return, you must tell me your name.”

I had paused a bit at this (Ma’s old nonsense, ringing in my head).

But it can’t be stealing if they give me something back. It was merely a fair trade, I think, and when I’m famous Ma will see her fears prove unfounded.

I leaned close and whispered it into his ear. He smiled, then, just a little.

He showed me a can of paint, a round metal container the size of my fist. “Use this,” said he, “to paint your name. That will be payment, and then your hopes will become reality.”

And so I left, paint in hand!

\* \* \*

Inside the can roiled crisp, white paint, the color of angels (not the color of our angels. We don’t have angels. This is important, but I can’t remember why.).

I made quick work of it—after mere minutes (or was it hours?)—I dropped my brush and stepped back to glance approvingly upon my design. You wouldn’t recognize it, I tell you!

It was perfect. I hardly recognized my name. There, emblazoned on my wall, I had painted my name over and over until trails of white dripped from the curves of each letter, smearing and spiraling, a veritable work of true art in the cleanest white. It’s dried so lovely in my house; I haven’t been able to focus on other work while it’s on the wall for me to admire forever.

\* \* \*

It has been a week since, and the man of ice spoke right! Every day now I have socialites and newspapers knocking at my door to revere the name on my wall. I have done it! My art is treated with the highest regard in this country—it is like a miracle—and as soon as I find my creative spark again I shall go about finishing my old paintings.

But I am in no hurry. I quite enjoy the attention. I’ve met all sorts of people, and they smile and take my photo and tell me all the sentiments I once dreamed about hearing.

Ma saw my wall. But she said nothing. Actually, she told me that my name should never have been brought across the sea. That makes little sense—where would we be if I had left it behind? Ma should know that it’s my name or our livelihood, not both. There’s no balance, not for things like this. The important milestone is that I’ve secured us wealth and standing. I’ll buy Ma a cartload of gifts to ease her discomfort (she hates the strangers in our halls).

Forget what she said. I’m overjoyed enough for the both of us!

\* \* \*

I tried to draw the place where I was born, today. I thought at least I might be able to accomplish that (I haven't been able to continue my old pieces for months now). But I couldn't complete it—I tried until the pads of my fingers were red and raw and my vision blurred at the edges—and I still couldn't recall the details properly. I try to paint other things every day but nothing is ever as perfect.

If I can't produce new work, surely I will lose my hard-earned fame, too, and they will call me old trouble and leave me to rot.

It is all because I ran out of that perfect white paint. But I am afraid to ask that man in the shop in case he wants my name again.

I confess, I am unsure I remember it these days. I have strangers in my halls gawking and commending the name on my walls, but the more I stare at my own handiwork, the more I do not know what it says. Or what it ever said.

It meant something important, I think. ■



**Justin Li**, Grade 12, Pingry School, Basking Ridge, NJ.  
Graham Touhey, *Educator*; Region-at-Large, *Affiliate*.  
**Gold Medal Portfolio**

**Command Companies Writing Portfolio**

## Cicadas and Sweets

### PERSONAL ESSAY & MEMOIR

I met her in the Sichuan countryside. On our first day together, I showed her how to guide scissors through folded paper to make cutouts of little white moths. After some lopsided attempts, we poked holes in their wings and tied them to the ends of bamboo so that they dangled halfway down the shaft.

I carried the devices to the edge of a neighbor's field, where we stood facing an expanse of green pillars brushed blonde at their tips with bright flowers. Linked to the giggles of children, six or seven bamboo shafts like ours meandered through the plants at the center of the field.

"Have you seen canola flowers before?" I asked. She had never—it was her first time visiting Sichuan. Her grandmother had lived here before immigrating to New Jersey, my home state, as a teen in the 50s. I plucked one of the skinny pods from a stem and rolled it in between my fingers until it unzipped at its seams, revealing tiny black seeds resting inside. "This is where the oil comes from. My mom says the canola here gives her dishes a flavor unique to our region of Sichuan." I wondered if she cared. "It's really no different from our canola oil in New Jersey, though," I added.

She nodded and adjusted a dainty gold ring on her index finger. Her hands were pale, with long, willowy fingers. They seemed so out of place in the rugged landscape. Little drops of perspiration accumulated at the collar of her Princeton T-shirt, and I began to regret taking her out in the heat.

She pointed to the bamboo sticks. "What are these for?"

"Here, I'll show you," I said.

I gripped the bamboo with two hands and ran through an opening between the rows of flowers. When I'd gathered enough speed, the wind gave life to my paper moth, which fluttered and danced on the string behind me. One by

one, live moths emerged from the stalks in pursuit of my prop as if it were a potential mate. I'd always cherished the sense of mastery and thrill I felt as the insects gathered with my first few steps into the field of flowers.

When I turned around to look at her, she moved with an indifferent trot towards me and her moth bounced lonely at shoulder level. As she picked up her pace, the string rose to be perpendicular with the top of her bamboo, and soon, she led her own troupe.

When she joined me at the center of the field, I demonstrated how she could make the moths curve and swirl by zigzagging and jumping through the rows of flowers in our way. They fluttered weightlessly like white cherry blossom petals, paths dictated by slipstreams at the tips of our bamboo. When we turned back abruptly at the borders of the fields, they flit by us and cascaded upon each other in an effort to change directions.

The exercise and motionless air had drenched us in sweat. After a couple laps and diagonals through the field, she crouched down to rest, brushing off the dirt that smothered the sides of her Nikes. By the look on her face, I could tell it was about time to go home for the day.

\* \* \*

We met up again the next day at the sugarcane fields, and this time she wore her grandmother's boots. The field was next to a river, and it was difficult to differentiate the smell of the moss rotting in the banks from that of the manure of farm animals, or the ever-present smell of approaching rain that hung in the countryside air.

When my mother used to bring me here, she brought a machete and she'd run the blade down the purplish burgundy shell of the ripest stalks, casting long splinters with each downward motion of the arm. Since I was not as confident as my mother in wielding the instrument and reasoned that the large blade might be too menacing to carry around, I came empty-handed.

Instead, I told her to look for the green ones. Although they weren't as sweet as they would be when ripe, their shells were not as tough and we could bite into them with our molars to expose the white fibers within, which were brimming with precious juice just the same. I used my foot as a makeshift fulcrum to snap the sugarcane from its roots. Mechanically, I broke it into halves over my knee, turned the halves into quarters, and the quarters into eighths the size of track batons that we could brandish in our hands as we walked. I clasped the shell of one in between my teeth and jolted my head to rip the casing off, leaving around two inches of fiber for her at the end.

She mimicked me, and we bit into the sugarcane at the same time. “Am I supposed to swallow this?” she asked after a couple of chews.

“No, spit the fibers out when it’s dry,” I said.

She spit out the gnawed-up clump, then blew exaggerated raspberries like a child sputtering unwanted chunks of ginger hidden in their food. I laughed.

As we walked through the field, she said that her grandmother hadn’t told her about any of these activities, or much about her childhood at all for that matter; perhaps she wasn’t a storyteller, because I found it hard to believe that memories so integral to my mother’s childhood—and ones that had become so integral with mine—had simply faded with time and distance. We stopped occasionally, stopping to replenish our pockets with more sugarcane, and after a while, she began to eat at a faster rate than I could peel.

As I reached into a grove for a new stalk, I heard the rattle of a cicada clinging to the plant. The noise was synonymous with stepping outside in the Chengdu countryside, and I’d not once heard a positive word about the insects. Despite their sinister red eyeballs, I thought they were undeserving of their reputation. The universally loathed sonic deluge the species produced in the summertime was really a mesh of individual mating songs that weren’t so irritating alone. I picked it up, gently pinning its wings to the sides of its body, and rubbed a finger back and forth along its ribs. She recoiled at the cicada’s buzz.

“There’s no need to be scared. They aren’t so bad. I used to play with them all the time under my bed’s mosquito net,” I told her.

“You mean you let these things crawl on your pillow?”

“Yeah, it was like we were in a little cage, just me and the cicada.”

She scrunched her nose.

“They’re harmless,” I said, grabbing her wrist and placing the cicada in her hand. For the moment it rested on her palm before she jerked her arm from my grip, the grotesque bug looked incongruous against her unblemished fingers.

“Don’t do that!” she blurted. She faltered a bit, as if she didn’t mean to be so harsh. I apologized, but she remained quiet for the rest of the time we spent in the fields.

We took the same path back home that my mother and I always did, which was shaded by sizable willow trees. Every time we used to traipse under the thin overhanging branches, we would jump and grab onto them, and if we pulled hard enough, the leafy strands would snap off. When the bottoms of the branches still seemed years above the tips of my fingers, my mother used to break one off for me, loop it around into a wreath, and place it on my head like a crown.

The branches hung down to my shoulders now. I grabbed onto one as I brushed them from my face and fashioned it into a wreath like I'd seen my mother do so many times before. I walked up behind her and placed it on her head, slipping a few dandelions I'd picked from the grass below into the loops of the branch. She said, "I probably look stupid," but I thought she was pretty with it in her hair.

\* \* \*

Knobs of the sap stuck to the bark of the peach tree in various translucent shades of amber, and when I poked them, they had a rubbery, sticky quality, like gum. My favorite Chinese candy was made from the resin; they were chewy with hues of peachy flavor, sweet but not overly saccharine, sticky so when you'd bite into them, they'd get stuck on your teeth and you'd have to swipe them off with your tongue. My mother also claimed that lotion made of the peach gum smoothed the wrinkles in her skin, but we collected it today for a different purpose.

"They look like gummies," she said, making a face. "Can we eat them now?"

"No, we have to boil it."

A light push was enough to peel the resin from notches in the bark, and we were careful not to crumble it under the pinch of our fingers as we collected them in small canvas bags.

She pressed the play button on an old CD player I'd brought from home, and my mother's old CD of classic Sichuan country songs began to play as we harvested the gum. She hummed the repetitive melodies when she'd learned them. I figured that the heat wasn't so bad in the shade.

The peach gum rattled against the glass when we emptied them into a bowl of water on my kitchen table; they'd hardened into lumpy crystals on our walk back. In an hour, the pieces of gum had grown in size and were soft and translucent from the water they'd absorbed, and we used chopsticks to remove the dirt, as well as any hard impurities that hadn't softened. As we leaned over the bowl, the loose strands of her hair at the top of her head mingled with mine.

"What do you think?" I asked.

"I think I have no idea what we're doing," she said, plucking a twig out of the sap.

After we'd finished picking out all the debris, we poured the contents of the bowl into a ceramic pot over the stove. As it came to a boil, we took turns adding handfuls of rock sugar, raisins, goji berries, and lychee into the crystal soup. We dropped some fronds of white fungus into the pot too. She stirred it—it had a jelly-like quality from the melted gum. As it simmered, bubbles rose

slowly through the medley and jiggled the surface when they popped.

I scooped two bowls from the pot and placed a glass spoon in each. Sitting beside her at the kitchen table, we thrust spoonfuls of it into our mouths while it was still hot. The solid peach gum debris which floated in the soup was mushy enough to be slurped without chewing, and a woody flavor lingered in between all the different shades of sweetness. She finished her bowl first and got up for seconds, and then thirds. Though our mouths were sticky with sugar residue after the pot was empty, I did not feel the same nauseating sensation that I'd felt after finishing all the peanut candies on the coffee table a few summers ago; even without dinner, my stomach felt full with sweet satisfaction.

\* \* \*

Yangmei fruit trees speckled the mountains by our house. It was a farther trek than the fields to get there, but judging from the energy in her walk, she seemed to enjoy the journey. On the way up, we chatted about our families, about our lives back home, about how strange it was that we lived only twenty miles from each other in New Jersey and had never met, about the fact that she would be leaving tomorrow.

When we'd reached halfway up the mountain, I pointed into the tall trees, where little red orbs hung on the branches in bunches fifteen feet above the ground.

"We're climbing those?" she asked.

"How else are we going to get to the berries?"

I gave her a boost up to the first branch and handed her a small wicker basket. After I'd climbed up onto an adjacent branch, I hung the basket in between us on a twig.

"There are green ones, which aren't ripe yet. The small, bright red ones are hard and sour, and the big dark red ones are mushy and don't have much flavor." I pointed out each variation as I described them.

I picked a medium-sized berry off a lower branch and held it in between my thumb and index finger. The scarlet stalks of pulp, which I'd always compared to sea anemone, depressed and parted slightly at my fingertips. "These are the best ones," I said, handing her the berry. "Watch out for the pit."

She took a small bite out of it, exposing the fruit's fuzzy center and a gradient of white to red radiating outwards on each stalk. Eating these berries in the trees was always my favorite part of my summers here, so I waited for her reaction to the fruit with anticipation.

"It tastes like strawberry, but better," she said, juice on her chin.

Sliding along our branches, we picked as many of the medium-sized berries as we could, tossing some into the basket, and others into our mouths. As we

picked, I wondered if the week she spent with me was just passing time for her, or if we'd ever meet again in New Jersey. If we never met again, I wondered what she'd tell her friends about the boy she met on her trip to China who put a cicada in her hand and flowers in her hair, and had her climbing trees and running like a child through the fields. I wondered if any of it meant anything to her the same way it did to me.

The walk up didn't feel that long, yet looking out at all the farmland from the branches of the tree, I felt like I could see the whole province. The last time I'd been up there with my mother seemed like so long ago. We spent the rest of daylight with our heads in the leaves, staining our fingers and faces red and listening to the songs of the cicadas. ■



**Sylvia Nicholas-Patterson**, Grade 12, Harrison School for the Arts, Lakeland, FL. Clifford Parody, *Educator*; Region-at-Large, *Affiliate*. **Gold Medal Portfolio**

The Maurice R. Robinson Fund Writing Portfolio

## laundry day (but i feel filthier each trip)

### POETRY

“i could just kill myself,” she said.  
momma pointed to the broken  
telephone wire hanging in front of  
our new york apartment.

she rested her hands on her hips  
and marveled at the image  
she painted for me, for us.  
“i lived a good life,

i could hang there if i pleased.”  
i understood hanging from the  
monkey bars, hanging with friends,  
but a wire seemed impractical.

there was no room for comfort,  
the sparks nipped at passing birds,  
and it was too high for someone  
to catch you when you fell.

but momma and i already had  
this conversation—i knew she meant  
death and all its intricacies.  
she knew i was biding time.

i didn't know much about it,  
just that it was "like sleeping,"  
and "like sleeping" seemed boring.  
but she looked at me as if

asking my eight-year-old brain  
to articulate a strong argument  
strong enough to keep her afloat,  
to fix dinner, revive  
grandma, have enough time  
to catch momma if she strayed too far.  
she knew i could handle it,  
but for how long?

how long could i keep up with  
my own adultification?  
how long could i keep her breathing?  
not alive, just breathing

enough to have someone else  
to help with housework.  
"you don't have time for that" i told her.  
"today's laundry day."

it was true. my siblings and i woke up  
saturday morning ready to trek  
the two-hour walk to the laundromat,  
my way of saying "life goes on,"

"it be like that sometimes."  
phrases that are supposed to  
make sense once i'm grown.  
momma just chuckled, patted

my nappy hair. i'd be in charge of fixing  
that too once we got back.  
"i guess you're right," she said.  
"go grab the cart inside for me." ■



**Esther Sun**, Grade 12, Los Gatos High School, Los Gatos, CA.  
Peter LaBerge, *Educator*; Writopia Lab, *Affiliate*.  
**Gold Medal Portfolio**

The New York Times Writing Portfolio

## Cello Concerto in B Minor, Op. 104

### POETRY

*After Antonín Dvořák*

*Mvt. I: Allegro*

in the belly / of the woods / I toss  
    kindling into a pit // jagged / geometry  
    of combustion // strike matches

on my skin // watch the campfire work / its teeth  
    through mountain / blackness // & I  
    am incendiary // north wind

from upper valley / no match  
    for the flames that drink / forest breath  
    like praise // for the fire / undressing

itself / before the eyes / of the moon //

*Mvt. 2: Adagio ma non troppo*

You come in from the back garden  
through the screen door, skirt billowing

like an elfin sigh. Night lilies  
cupped in your hands. Outside

the kitchen window, the hermit thrushes  
sing:           *leave me*

*to walk alone through my dreams.* Skin  
swapping sallowness for lustre, your voice

no longer thick with death's honeyed ballad.  
The moon, waxing gibbous,

twists its head to gaze at you.

The stars that puncture the sky  
like the candles burning  
dark grass beyond the screen door.

I pluck dreams of you

from my sleep garden until they begin to grow  
less like petals and more like poems.

*Mvt. 3: Finale (Allegro moderato)*

I drive. The city in the distance  
like crumpled aluminum. Dark

mountain behind me, a closed-up shop.  
Wild Chincoteague ponies

ravage my sleep, carry away my ghosts  
in twin saddlebags. I don't know

what to expect, but I do know this:  
where I am going, there will be no singing,

only the sound of the highway mumbling  
in the starched dark. Telephone poles

buttressing dawn. The horses' hooves like drums. ■

# Stranger Teenager!

## SHORT STORY

**Rachel Eastman**, Grade 12, Flandreau High School, Flandreau, SD. Jamie Fryslye, *Educator*; The University of South Dakota, *Affiliate*. **Silver Medal with Distinction Portfolio**

“Where you been lately?” I ask the person in the mirror. The person I no longer was, but I wished I was again. I missed being that teenager. I missed being the teen who’d lock themselves in their room and stay up all night on the internet. That person isn’t me anymore and I hate it. My hand reaches for the one in the mirror. A warmness fills my soul, feeling my own touch that I was deprived of for years. Although I’m 18 now, I see the stupid 14-year-old in the mirror. The one with the long, messy hair. A me that I was embarrassed for years until this point. I just want to hug that kid. I want to tell him that it’s okay. We made it to 18.

Since I was 9, I was never sure if we’d make it to 18. I thought I’d be dead by now in the most non-depressive way. My dad says I won’t make it. My sister thought I wouldn’t make it. I thought I’d make it this far in school without dropping out. My brother and sister were all out of the house, doing drugs, and causing trouble by my age. But here I am, looking at the 14-year-old I missed. I wish I stayed that way. I wish I never went out that one evening with those boys on October 14th. I could see the innocence in my own eyes. The eyes that were protected by thick-framed glasses. That kid didn’t have a clue that he was going to buy himself contacts the following year.

The kid never responds, but I don’t mind. “You, yeah you!” I chuckle, pointing at myself. “You still wasting time?” I subtly poke fun at myself, remembering nights online. I lick myself, thinking about the time we’d stay up until 3 a.m. talking to a girl who was 1,400 miles away and a whole hour ahead. I

miss that feeling of being secured with someone. I never got to have that trust again with another person, but maybe I will one day. Even now, I miss that girl. She was short and five months younger than us. Danlyn was the name we gave ourselves. In retrospect, I was probably obsessed with her, but I never cared. She was my first true friend.

The me in the mirror touched his hair, twirling it in his fingers. I smirked, setting my arm on the mirror. “Why are you acting like a stranger? I’m you. We’re the same.” I tell myself, trying to convince myself to talk. Maybe he’d ask me questions whether Caelyn and I lasted forever. Maybe he’s just in disbelief that we’re alive. Once I turned 15, things just went wild. I didn’t expect to live that long and life was confusing because I was sure I’d be dead. I never planned that far ahead. I turned into my siblings. I became wild, staying out late and hanging with people I knew I shouldn’t. They felt like friends, but they were never there. The kid in the mirror had no clue what was going to happen.

Suddenly, I spoke. “I never thought I’d see us that far along.” I turned my head to look at myself. I raised my eyebrow and nodded with a smug smile. I giggle, noticing my own purple and black braces. I see the little wristbands almost embedded in his wrists and the holes on the wrists of the sweatshirt. If I look above and at an angle, I will see the pants I’d wear for days straight because I liked the fit of them. The gross kid I used to be. The kid I missed. I put my arm down from the mirror and nodded, setting my hands on my hips.

“I missed seeing you. I miss being you,” I admit, my eyes wandering to the bathroom floor. “C’mon now, I missed you. Stop acting like a stupid stranger and start talking to me. Ask me questions, tell me what you miss—just tell me everything!” I snap happily. My hands turn into fists and I smile. The kid in the mirror is concerned and confused. I know what he’s feeling. He doesn’t feel special and worth it. He’s confused. He feels hated by society. I know that we still feel like we don’t belong in anything, but now I know it’s okay—he doesn’t. Something tells me that he isn’t going to talk about anything with me.

I look away from myself, but I persist. “Look—me—everything will be alright. You make it to 15, 16, 17, and 18! In two more years, the thing you’ve been struggling with since 9 will go away. You will make it one year without self-harm. You are going to get so tired, but in the best way for you. You will shut everyone out and focus on yourself. We’re finally going to love ourselves for who we are. You are finally not going to care about what others think. You are going to become a rude person but in the best way. You’re no longer going to be the person you think you’re forever going to be. Spoiler alert: you fail, but you try again and again. You try without even realizing it and I’m just so proud of you.” I say, my mouth opens, and it won’t close. I’m speechless.

The me in the mirror freezes. I watch myself prick at my own fingertips, a habit I started because of braces. He doesn't know what to do and it isn't easy to make that kid cry, but I am. I've become a crying fool over the years. I sense that I'm making myself uncomfortable. I hated crying in public and I hated being around other crying people. Of course, that kid in the mirror was extremely uncomfortable. The only thing we could say to comfort crying people were just, "Oh, I'm sorry." We never were good with anything social. The kid I used to be was so scared of everything and hid in his room, relying on strangers online for help and happiness. I can't change anything that happened in the past and neither can that kid in the mirror. Just talking to each other just made everything better. It made me happy.

"How do you feel right now?" I ask myself. I'm still avoiding eye contact.

The me in the mirror sighs and shrugs, plugging my hoodie up. "I'm okay."

"You're not okay," I tell myself. I shrug too. "Everything is confusing. You don't feel like you fit in now. You can calm down, just don't worry right now. I know it's hard to believe, but you're not a monster. No one is shutting you out. Even mom and dad love you, even though it feels impossible. I don't know if you're in the midst of friend drama, but of course, your friends love you. What are you even thinking about?" I keep staring at the ground. I can't see what he's looking at beneath him. I don't know if he's in a bathroom or somewhere else.

I sigh and cross my arms. "I don't know. Dad took away therapy. I screamed at mom and I yelled at my friends. Mom's mad at me for my grade in math. My cousin is angry because I won't leave my friends. Everything's just a difficult choice." I explain to myself. I sigh, remembering that point in my life. I don't want to spoil it for myself, but I do choose my cousin over my friends. I don't stop screaming at mom until I'm 16. I never get better in math, but I learn to cheat. I go back to therapy for nine months before getting sent to a mental ward and being prescribed antidepressants. I get a new counselor and we start working on trauma.

I stare at myself and we both feel that things are going to get better with time—something I never understood at 14. "I'm going to spoil one thing for you—you're going to live in this season of screaming and being confused for a while. Just know that we make it to 18 and we graduate. Just remember that things will get better with time. You're going to do things you don't expect, but you're learning. Keep learning, kid. I'll see you around." I tell myself before the mirror blurs and I see me. Me today. Me with healthy hair that recovered from many bleaches and hair dyes. I see the face that has scars from picking at zits from nervousness. The bags under my eyes still welcome me.

I glance over to my room, that's the one above my old one. The purple room downstairs turned grey and the one upstairs stayed dark red. There's a new light on top. The room is no longer going to be mine soon after I move. Soon enough, the things I should have talked about pop into my head. I should have told myself that our parents get internet again and that we do dishes on a daily basis now. Staring into my room, I know that I'd figure it out eventually. Still, I should have told him it wasn't too late to change his haircut. That rat's nest bothered me—that's the only thing I regret now.

No—I should have told him we got a dog. Oh well. ■

# Carriacou

## PERSONAL ESSAY & MEMOIR

**Renee Bertrand**, Grade 12, Phillips Exeter Academy, Exeter, NH.

Genevieve Beckman Moriarty, *Educator*; The National Writing Project in New Hampshire, *Affiliate*. **Silver Medal with Distinction Portfolio**

I lay in the backyard of my grandfather's island home one warm summer afternoon. My body splayed wide across the grass; the blades shifted across my feet. Leaves of young banana trees sprouted from the ground. Farther back, past the few houses dotting the cliffs to the east, lush rainforest touched the ocean. The land beneath me was so velvety that I twisted my hands into it and cupped a small mound of dirt. The warm soil spread between my fingertips. Auntie Styris stood next to me, taking down stark sheets from the swaying clothesline. After she placed the last cloth into the wicker basket, she called me to come with her; the bus was almost around the bend.

Black aunties in bonnets ran from room to room of the bright yellow house, knocking on bathroom doors, yelling at my cousins to hurry up. Crumbs scattered the kitchen counters from this morning's breakfast of fresh bread from the island baker. Pebbles of sand dug into my bare soles as I walked out the front door that never closed, and my cousins spilled out behind me.

My mother held the bus door open. She wore a hand-dyed cotton dress like my aunties, covered in patterns of fish and waves. I pulled my straight hair up into a bun while I waited for a seat. The bus was an old blue van with rust around the rims of the wheels and a window missing, which my younger cousins waved out of.

The bus headed into the lush green hills. I felt every twist and turn of the steep old roads as we climbed higher and higher through the dense tropical

woods. Trees and trees and more trees whirled by, dotted with fruits of every color of the rainbow until the hills turned into Van Gogh paintings. I stared out the window, my eyes catching the tall bamboo shoots and holding them, trying to make the world slow down.

We stopped in front of a small, seaside house the color of kamrangas. The scent of the sea mixed with a smell only found at my grandmother's house in Florida or my aunties' houses in Queens. The smell of Caribbean food, of home. I sat down in the soft saffron sand and unwrapped my roti. The layers of golden dhalpuri dotted with brown burn marks wrapped the chickpea, potato, and curry goat filling. The curry stew flowed from the tin foil and drip drip dripped into the soil.

Grandad directed us through the thick hanging roots of the banyan trees, clearing vines with a machete until we came upon a small wooden house suspended over concrete blocks. Vines of the cerasee and tambran trees wove over the walls and through the windows of the old structure. Green vines and maroon sorrel plants followed the contours of the house, racing up the walls until they grew over the steel roof. The house had one room with no floor, and only cutouts for windows and a door, like the houses I drew for my mother as a child. My mother held my hand while I climbed through the door frame. We stood in the center of the room; Auntie Styris stared at the metal roof while I admired the small yellow and purple flowers peeking out of the thick brush at our feet. This was the house Grandad grew up in with his 13 siblings. The walls were still lightly stained with his mother's, Victoria's, handmade dyes. The open window frame showed Grandad already clearing through the brush back to the road.

We stood together again at the crest of a great grass dune. Large golden reeds grew from the sand like the fields of wheat. Scattered where the reeds bled into the ocean were weathered graves of white marble and seastone. Some rested under the banyan trees while others were mostly submerged in the sand, nearly swallowed up by the sea. My mother pulled back green seagrape leaves to reveal a grave of limestone surrounded by conch shells, bleached pink from the sun. It was Grandad's mother's grave, but the stone was too weathered to tell the name.

I picked up one of the conch shells that rested at my feet. My hand ran along its grooves and into the spiral aperture, checking for any creatures, but it was dead. I carried the rose shell back up the grass dunes, to the blue van, to take back to America with me. ■

# The Problem with Words

## PERSONAL ESSAY & MEMOIR

**Iris Wang**, Grade 12, Clovis North High School, Fresno, CA. Chad Hayden, *Educator*; Region-at-Large, *Affiliate*. **Silver Medal with Distinction Portfolio**

From the beginning, the problem was *words*.

\* \* \*

The school librarian sat me in front of the computer, its effervescent screen glaring back at me in a deep blue glow. She pulled up the test, the wire of the mouse curling like an inky snake. When she clicked, the snap that rings out resounded painfully through the air, as if plastic was being crunched and cracked.

Five years old, I jittered with excitement. I was taking a test on a *computer*, and computers are cool. Computers are fun. I like computers. I like computers a lot.

“You need to fill in the blank on all twenty questions,” the librarian said, gesturing to the words on the screen, “Add the missing word to the sentence.”

Beside me, Mama was scratching against her chin, eyebrows furrowed.

“Do you get what you need to do?”

I absolutely was not listening, instead fidgeting in front of the radiant computer screen, the polished keyboard with keys an inch thick, disjointed from the box of hardware. It was a *big* computer, and because of that, it must be even *more* fun, right?

### Question #1 Fill in the blank:

*I tie my \_\_\_\_\_.*

1. Car
2. Sky
3. Shoe
4. Umbrella

The sentence “I tie my \_\_\_\_\_” made no sense to me. Why would you tie something? Tying things are no fun. I can’t make knots. The bunny ear never goes under the other bunny ear. It always stretches outwards. I don’t understand why one must tie things when you can use velcro. Velcro is more fun. It makes a funny sound.

I don’t like cars. They’re boring and the seatbelt is uncomfortable. Shoes smell bad and hurt my feet. Umbrellas are hard to open.

But the sky is pretty. Light blue, like the computer screen, it bathes me in warmth. The sky, dappled by white clouds and the illumination of summer sun, brightens the world with its baby softness, its vast openness.

*I tie my sky.*

I heard Mama groan behind me. I don’t understand what’s wrong with that sentence. The words are right, after all.

\* \* \*

People like to assume that infants say, “Ma . . . Ma . . .” to mean “Mama” and “Da . . . Da . . .” to mean “Dada,” a symbol of their blossoming love for the nurturing parents that tend to them. Or perhaps, we believe that because we say the words “Mama” and “Dada” to the infants, they will take up this habit, repeat it, and learn to call their parents by name.

In reality, infants say “Ma . . . Ma . . .” and “Da . . . Da . . .” because those are the first sounds they begin to form, meaningless babbles that they are genetically conditioned to speak initially, simply because it is an easy beginning. No explication originates from these rudimentary noises, only the standard procedure of human intellectual development.

That is also the reason why there are so many similar enunciations for “Mother” in various languages. “Mom” in English, “Mama” in Mandarin and Spanish, “Eomma” in Korean, “Mema” in Albanian. Babies do not say “Ma . . . Ma . . .” to enunciate their version of “Mother” in their familial language, but rather those languages adapted from the babies’ first sounds to create a word equivalent to “Mother.”

I asked my mother what my first words were, and as expected she said “Mama” and then “Baba.” Just like the majority of students in my school, in my state, in my country, across the ocean in Asia, around the whole world.

\* \* \*

And so it came to be, that my first words meant nothing. No words for mother, father. Only empty sound.

And so it came to be, that words were desirable.

\* \* \*

There were two muses whispering in my ear, saying the same things, in different flavors. One spoke in soft Mandarin, words that hummed and rang in an amalgamation of tones, lips tender and light pink. The other jabbered in rapid English, bright and cheerful and always quick, casual, relaxed.

Mandarin came first with tender arms, speaking over the dinner table as it offered me bites of soup dumplings and rice noodles. Mandarin tucked me in, wished me good night, turned off the light, and made sure I didn’t sneak out at midnight to steal chocolates from the pantry.

English followed swiftly, as it sat me down on the sofa and read me pine-smelling books with bold illustrations scribbled over the fluttering pages, and round letters printed neatly at the bottom. English played games with me on my mother’s laptop, instructing me when to press the right arrow key and when to use space to jump.

The three of us lived together in the airy space of a child’s imagination, seated in the row, as if on the putrid sweat of after-school buses, in movies where bodies jam tightly together like logs against a cracked cotton sea. We converse, spittle flying out of rapidly moving mouths, voices ringing in each ear. So hard to decipher, a finely blended roast sputtered out of a hasty coffee machine.

They are the type of married couple that fights by finishing each other’s sentences. The most unbearable, uncomfortable type of nuptial, completely unamiable, that made me want to slip out of the confines of their tight embrace, free of them both.

To eat dinner: “*Wo hungry le.*” I am hungry.

To go to the library: “*Wo shang read zhai ne ge library.*” I want to read at the library.

To declare my eternal rage: “*Zhe bu fair!*” It’s not fair!

We are the three strands of the braid, except that comparison is not to say that we are endlessly intertwined. Actually, when you bind a braid, you group two of the strands together, and leave one out. Then you bind another two

strands together, and you leave another out. And you do that again and again, till you're out of string.

There is always one left out, while the other two elope.

It has always been that way.

And the problem has always been with words.

\* \* \*

Not with the words themselves, but rather my unfortunate deficiency of them.

\* \* \*

And then, kindergarten.

That fragile understanding of societal norms, that tendency to loom in the back of the class with eyes downcast, that folded mouth never opened. The taut wordlessness followed like a bleak shadow, and in the few moments when it was dispersed, the few words that came whispered with accented English, derived from the parental vocality, dappled with tints of Mandarin.

It was an insecure voice. It knew what it wanted to say, but not how to say it. It could form half the idea, then come up short with words of the wrong language spewing out, and freeze before the idea could permeate into unretrievable spoken word.

Mandarin, being my favored companion, fostered a sense of security in the home, sweeping the dusty plumes of English into shallow corners. English was spoken as a forced exercise, as homework Mama shoved in front of my face, as listening tasks she ordered me to complete, not anything of a nature that I wished to do myself.

English did not flourish on my tongue. It was difficult to pronounce, and when it came out broken or taxed by strange syntax, I hesitated to use it further.

I knew what I wanted to say, but I did not know how to say it.

\* \* \*

The words in one language, I could not pair with another.

And therein lay the problem.

A deficiency of words that stemmed from a deficiency of translations.

\* \* \*

“And then I used the king piece on the one white square from the two black square and used it to eat the other piece and then that made me very happy because I won since I ate the other piece . . .”

The lack of proper words.

To capture, not to eat.

To maneuver, to move, to relocate, but in this case it was not being used.

Not one, not two, but first and second.

The inability to form direct connections between words. In Mandarin, “yi” is both one and first. “Er” is second, “liang” is two. But when you count, you do not count “one,” “two,” “three.” Instead, you actually count “first,” “second,” “third.”

I knew both languages, but I knew half as much in each language as another student my age who knew one. I shouldn’t have been ashamed of it, but I was. In the home, when I stumbled on my Mandarin, I desired to use English less. At school, when the other children could not understand over the overpowering accent, I cursed the Mandarin on my tongue.

I wished for more words, and I wished the words matched, colluded, partnered together and decided that they would serve a mutual purpose, explain the same things, operate the same way, so that I wasn’t *the lesser* for knowing *more*.

\* \* \*

And then, there was a story.

And then, there was another.

And then, the laptop keys are all in English, and I type them rapidly in English, and they come out wrong, wrong, all of them are wrong.

And I cried the first three times, because of how disjointed they sounded, how uneven and unnatural and stilted. And I swore I would never write another story again.

Words, words, words.

\* \* \*

And then I did.

\* \* \*

But then, there was a song in Mandarin. A mother’s day song, all in Mandarin, and my lips formed the sound wrong. So completely incorrect, butchered pronunciation, shame to your ancestors across the sea.

But then, there was another song, and this one worse and this one I ruined, and it was destruction, pure ravagement.

But then, I told myself I would never sing another song ever again.

Words, words, words.

\* \* \*

But then I did.

\* \* \*

Mandarin grew meeker. English painted white pages of school essays, scoured the dictionaries for the right words, and passed the time on young adult novels with flashy covers.

Mandarin explained to my mother my best friend who played a trombone

named Tromby and bellowed in the hallways. Mandarin complained that the soup was too spicy. But Mandarin kowtowed during the dominant nine or so hours of the day when daily reading logs were due and physical fitness took the form of barked commands to run a lap around the baseball diamond.

I miss the days where I can tie my sky without there being any problem, simply because the words were beautiful.

My Mandarin melted away, bled from the burning flame of English, and though a few traces of its glittering snow remains still, never will it be as prominent as before.

Some days I miss it, when my grandparents call from Taiwan brimming with love and praise I do not understand. When jokes are shared within the bonds of family that I do not comprehend, I claw for that buried knowledge. Mandarin ran away, dejected and miserable, but I wish I nourished it, garnered its affections, pulled it close to me and murmured, "I love you, you know that?"

In my childhood, English grew rowdy because I favored Mandarin. English demanded attention, and pressed by its incessant cries, I forgot my other child in the wretched alleyways of lingual memory and tended to the lonely infant grabbing for my palm.

I always nurtured one, and in the process, relinquished the hand of the other. But in the throes of absence, I desired the return of that which was not there and dug through the web of vernacular for the one I neglected. But when I failed to do so, Mandarin pried for my grasp, and I did not return it.

\* \* \*

I forgot the language when I forgot the words.

\* \* \*

Water flows through my fingertips, seeping out of my palms. I grasp for more, and some stays, some escapes. Lapping it up with an eager tongue, droplets splash outward, missing their intended target. I lean down and spoon for more, and more, and more, for it is never enough. Feeding that thirst is never enough. I must have more.

I take, and but some of the water withdraws from my grasp.

I drink, but not all flows peacefully down my throat.

So I keep taking, for one can never drink the sea. ■

# Body Scan

## PERSONAL ESSAY & MEMOIR

**Amelie Randall**, Grade 12, Interlochen Arts Academy, Interlochen, MI. Brittany Cavallaro and Joe Sascksteder, *Educators*; Kendall College of Art and Design of Ferris State University, *Affiliate*. **Silver Medal with Distinction Portfolio**

A younger version of myself has stood and scrutinized a pale and underdeveloped body in the scathing candor of a mirror. Has pressed hungry fingers into the delicate skin of my face. Searched each nook and cranny of a body for signs that it was undeserving of compassion.

\* \* \*

1. In the mirrored doors of my childhood closet, I could hide my body under a polyester princess dress, admiring how womanly I looked. A woman, like my mother, whom at that time I ached so desperately to be. Blonde, blue-eyed, I was nearly the spitting image. It wasn't until I was much older that I discovered that the golden sheen of her hair was nothing but stylists' bleach. That was not the only place where the resemblance was weak. She had the body of a woman, whereas I could peek right down the neckline of my dress and have a straight shot to my cotton TUESDAY underwear.

2. I run a hand over the velvet flesh of my torso while my mirror bears witness. Under my fingertips, goosebumps raise and turn my skin craterous like the moon. I wander over the small rise behind which I know my reproductive organs are nestled. I push back, try to flatten them away. It has no effect. I remember reading once that a woman can never have a truly flat stomach, because her uterus pushes against the outer wall of her abdomen. I remember wondering why we're taught to want one, then.

3. The first time my mirror noticed the small lump in the contour of my nose was in fifth grade, when a girl compared the central point of my face to Mount Everest. I could see that my nose was nothing at all like hers. And though no one's nose was like hers, or anyone else's for that matter, I knew that mine must somehow be comparably worse. Hers was elegant, small, a long slender swoop down her face. I began to examine my profile in the mirror, would run my pointer finger down the center of my face, trace the uneven bridge of my nose, pinch the sides in tight, push up the tip. The idea of imperfection hardened in my mind, grew into my skull and stayed there, permanent.

4. My mirror takes comfort in symmetry. I too crave it as a marker of quality craftsmanship, beauty, especially when it comes to the self, the body. I press my hands on either side of the valley of my ribcage. I try to shift the left side further into the cavern of my abdomen, try to make it match the right. I wonder if it is visible to an outsider. In the mirror I catch glimpses of my hips, askew, one leg slightly longer than the other. Ridiculous, small flaws, by no means an Achilles' heel. An insecurity at which no one blinks twice.

5. My mirror does not remember the first time I was called beautiful. It must have been a tender moment when I was nothing more than a shiny pink lump of body. It would have been an easy kind of beautiful. The new kind, the glassy kind in the magazines, is harsher. I have wasted so much of my short life in a mirror. When I do I walk my fingers across my face, pausing their movement delicately at each mark I find, resisting the urge to not-so-delicately pick at the spots. I trace constellations between those pimples and "beauty" marks and scars. I work my way up the cheekbones and then back down to my chin. I slide my thumbs over the line of my jaw, then down the ridge of my esophagus. My hands are small but under them my throat feels even smaller, soft, vulnerable.

6. In the mirror, I consider my legs. I marvel at their ability to carry me through every day. I see beauty there, in that. Yet, days when I feel the soft prickle of young hair emerging from my skin, I take to it with a razor. Yet, I mold myself into someone else's ideal. Even in the months when it is so cold that words seem to freeze the second they leave your lips. Even when no one will see these parts of me until June returns, I make alterations. I perform the act as though it is a show, as if someone unbeknownst to me is watching and will judge me if I leave the soft brown fuzz be.

7. I pout in the mirror. Then smile. Smirk. Twist and turn my lips into all the shapes I am capable of making. I squeeze them between my teeth, watch the blood rush in. They pinken, and then I coat them with a thick, pinker, gloss. I like the sheen, but it is not purely for aesthetic value. It draws attention when I perform the newest step in my lip routine: opening them. I spent too many years complicit with the doctrine of muted and lovely. Far too many for anyone's good. I have learned, now, how to use my mouth for something other than silence.

\* \* \*

I explore my body, this vessel, and I find it to be so fragile. Yet, I find it is also a reserve of incredible strength. I contradict, confirm, contradict again. I know everything to be true and a lie. The ownership of my body is in question. I learn to be a gracious guest in this temporary home. ■

# Anomia

## POETRY

**Vanessa Abraham**, Grade 12, Cumberland Valley High School, Mechanicsburg, PA.

Paul Nagle, *Educator*; Commonwealth Charter Academy, *Affiliate*.

### Silver Medal with Distinction Portfolio

I choke on colonialism,  
the fluent expat English weighing down  
my mother's tongue. Each  
cursive loop a noose  
around my neck.

This is the syllabic manipulation of  
love and language lost to  
we speak English here.

Behind the glass of the British Museum  
you will find my people  
stolen. I lie in wait.

You express awe at the serpent-snake tongue—  
double forked for a divided motherland.

Voyeur: peruse endless exhibitions  
of otherness, civilizations destroyed  
and reassembled for your leisure.

Recreation and re-creation are simple  
shades of violence apart.

Grind up the dust of an empire  
in the same mortar and pestle as my chai mix.  
Let the terra-cotta tiles of vowels tumble  
into my teacup, spiced and sweetened  
blood.

Tea comes with a price—  
the bitter  
aftertaste of assimilation.

Brush off each aksaram  
from the dirt of the British and  
set them on the altar—  
an offering to gods past and a  
sacrifice to gods present.

Dear self, remember:  
whiteness and holiness are  
not synonymous. ■

# Elegy to Margaret

## POETRY

**Jack Goodman**, Grade 11, Walter Payton College Preparatory High School, Chicago, IL.

Lisa Hiton, *Educator*; Writopia Lab, *Affiliate*. Gold Medal, **Best-in-Grade Award**

I'm told you've learned to tell  
fresh fish from their black marble eyes—  
glazed like calloused fingers, guitar strings  
caked in dust and dried blood.

You always did like fish.

Let's go to the river, you'd say,  
and I'd happily oblige. I wouldn't  
notice any scars. Look at the rocks.  
Watch—they stand up to the current.

You liked to stumble across them,  
cutting through the river  
like a butter knife through stitches.

The rocks got shy in spring,  
you said, scared of cherry blossoms  
and new beginnings. I just thought  
the water rose, but spring had never  
been your season, so shy rocks it was.

Fall was best. There were salmon  
in fall, ones you could fillet  
with the knife you kept at home.

I pushed past an old lady on the bus today,  
Margaret—you would've been proud.

Her hair rolled in rows of rising bread.

When I apologized, she scoffed with a disdain  
only the French can muster. I retreated  
into a back seat between the pages of a YA novel.

I wonder if she reads much poetry. I don't,  
but we would talk, and that was almost the same.

Sometimes, I cry.

You once told me that's healthy, voice  
lacquered with electrical tape, persimmon.  
You'd tell me that somewhere, fresh snow  
is blanketing spring's first buds. They tell me  
you moved upstate, but I know.

Last night, I named a star for you.

It's not the bright one south of Orion's Belt,  
but the dim one just beneath—I'm saving  
the bright one for me. You'd find that funny,  
having a star, like you're some big Greek hero.  
It's just you and Andromeda up there, Margaret.  
You and Andromeda and God. ■

# uncle sam

## POETRY

**Alana Kabaka**, Grade 12, Benilde-St. Margaret's School, St. Louis Park, MN. Kari Koshiol, *Educator*; Minnesota Writing Project, *Affiliate*. Gold Medal, **Best-in-Grade Award**

how to place a child in a casket step-by-step guide

step one

birth a black boy  
from a black womb  
and raise it in a black family  
with the knowledge of the world  
teach him to be good  
to be sweet  
and humble  
kind  
and composed  
remind him to be scared  
because the world is scary  
because uncle sam ain't looking out  
and he's not really your uncle  
and teach him to keep his hands out of his pockets  
and his hood down  
and his head up  
and not to look at nobody  
and to keep his arms crossed  
and his eyes closed  
and to grow comforted  
in his child-sized coffin

step two

let your child be a child  
and people will find a way to turn  
to turn boys into men  
and turn black hands into weapons  
and put bullets into melanin-pantied backs  
because i guess that's where they belong

step three

let the world do its thing

and it will

put black bodies in caskets

put bullets in backs

and babies in body bags

take a child's childhood

and make it a game of cops and robbers

step four

say goodbye

and remember that this was bound to happen

because he's black and breathing and alive

look down in his casket

tell him you love him

even before his brains bashed into cold concrete

carry his weight on your back

and let his name find camp in your eardrums

and let memories play like movies in your mind

take a step back look into his eyes one more time

then

shut the child-size casket

step five

repeat. ■

# Tahrir

## PERSONAL ESSAY & MEMOIR

**Lina Eid**, Grade 11, Fiorello H. LaGuardia High School of Music & Art and Performing Arts, New York, NY. Kimberly Cacioppo, *Educator*; NYC Scholastic Awards, *Affiliate*. Gold Medal, Civic Expression Award

I was only six years old at the time of the Revolution. As is the case with many young children, I didn't truly grasp the gravity of what was happening and what my family and I were a part of until years later—I didn't know I was living through what is now dubbed "the Arab Spring."

My recollections of the events are disjointed. My parents were both activists in Egypt. As such, my father was always out at the protests or organizing a neighborhood watch with other men on our street. By then, the police had deserted us. Perhaps deserted isn't the right word, though. Really, they just stopped policing (if they ever were) and began slaughtering. Egypt is, in essence, an autocracy crudely disguised as a republic. It has been for my entire life, and my father's life too.

What I do remember clearly is my father asking me each day if I would come with him to the protests in Tahrir Square. He wanted me to sit on his shoulders and yell chants at the top of my six-year-old lungs. He wanted me to make posters so that he could proudly show me off to his other friends at the protests: "*Look! That's my girl! Isn't she such an artist? She's a revolutionary, just like her Baba!*" I always said no. No, it's dangerous. No, it's boring. Who wants to stand outside in a packed square chanting for hours?

Looking back at my attitude, I feel shame. This was something important to my father, and the culmination of his and others' decades of human rights and political activism. A journalist and a human rights lawyer, his unwavering

demands for justice have been met with arbitrary arrests, torture, and death threats. As I've gotten older, he sometimes tells me stories. Like how back in college he and his friends had been pursued by the police for distributing Marxist literature to factory workers. The laborers hid them in a boiler room for over 24 hours, until they managed to escape through the rooftop exit, essentially parkouring down the side of the factory and fleeing through the desert. It's a funny story, at least the way he tells it.

Less funny are the stories about the time the police beat him with a chair until it broke. Or the weeks he spent as the sole leftist in a crowded cell of Islamist prisoners, memorizing the names of those killed in custody, so he could tell their families when he was released—while not knowing what his own fate would be. Those are the stories I did not want to hear. They were not things I wanted to dwell on, the image of my father beaten bloody. All this goes to say that in a revolution protesting police brutality, with the goal to topple the oppressive regime, *of course* my father was on the front lines.

But as a child all I cared about was the fact that school was closed and I had free time on my hands. It was like summer had come early for me. And if every once in a while my mother would hold me close and tell me to *get away from the window, habibty, those are gunshots*, so what? Death and injury only existed to me in the abstract.

As the Revolution's 10-year anniversary approaches, I think about all the demonstrators who came home maimed, or didn't come home at all, and I feel less guilty about staying behind. Hundreds of people died in an 18-day period, and thousands more were injured. My father very well could have been one of them, and yet he still went to every protest, every demonstration.

I think of my father's face during our twice weekly calls, slipping between pride and pain as he describes his friend's pleasure when receiving portraits I've made of her imprisoned children, Alaa and Sanaa. Pride that art has become my small contribution to keeping the Revolution alive. Pain that the government that betrayed the Revolution keeps us apart.

So here we are. My father in Egypt, banned from leaving for telling truths that "damage Egypt's reputation." My mother and I in New York, never sure if Egypt will let us return. Friends ask why we don't simply smuggle him out—as if he'd ever allow it—and I have to laugh. My father is a man of principle. Egypt is his home, his country, and he will never abandon it, even if that means putting his own safety and well-being at risk. I love that about him. I love that he is fighting for me, for Alaa and Sanaa, for our whole generation. I will continue his legacy. I only hope he lives long enough to see it. ■

# Epiphora

## SCIENCE FICTION & FANTASY

**Madhalasa Iyer**, Grade 10, Liberty High School, Frisco, TX. Pernie Fallon, *Educator*; Region-at-Large, *Affiliate*. Gold Medal, **New York Life Award**

8:00 p.m. (“Beaming” hour)

Jaden props up his elbows, brushes his brown bangs from his forehead, and gazes at the night sky.

“Aren’t the stars so pretty?” he asks, his big blue eyes completely mesmerized.

“Yes, they are pretty. But they aren’t stars,” I reply.

Jaden turns to face me, perplexed.

“They are makeshift guards, protecting us.”

Jaden rolled his eyes. “Whatever. They are pretty though.”

I smile. I see mother in him.

Mother.

The thought brings thousands of flashing memories. The piercing screams. Mother’s tear-filled cheeks. Her flailing hands reaching out to me. The merciless ironclad officials dragging her out of our house and our lives forever.

I blinked forcibly, stopping the tears about to drip from my eyes. I can’t cry. I’m not allowed to.

I lift Jaden up, holding his hand as we walk back into the house.

On the sofa, Papa sits, reading a newspaper with a fake smile on his face.

He looks up and greets us with “Hey kiddos!”

We nod back and Jaden walks into his room as I sit next to my father to peek at the headlines.

As usual, the Happy News segment has covered the entire editorial page. The same signs to show the perfect society and non-oppressive government that we

were currently blessed with. The news that makes us feel that going back into the previous eras would ruin our balance of society.

We once heard that in the prehistoric times there were methods by which a person could communicate with someone on the other side of the world. Of course, both history and that kind of innovation would be strictly prohibited.

You see, it's quite simple. Technological innovations and communications are supposed to be limited, so news of death doesn't spread easily. Knowledge of the death of one's kith and kin would be matters invoking serious displeasure and desolation. That kind of despair and misery had no place in the happy society that we were living in.

In simple words, crying is inexcusable.

The TP Government officials outlined it in their rule book of democracy and pursuit of happiness.

*"To ensure the equality, justice, and exaltation of our citizens, crying and any form or method that invokes tears are prohibited. Crying is a method of manipulation that neither benefits the person who is doing it nor the one who is receiving it. The lenses embedded in the citizens' eyes warn and inform the Tear-Prohibition government officials. They will receive treatment and necessary procedures to better their characteristics."*

Dad flipped the newspaper back to the front page.

The headlines read "OCCUPATION DAY TOMORROW" in big black bold letters with a yellow smiley face.

The inevitable Occupation Day.

My breath hitched, and pure cortisol released through my body. This yearly tradition scares all the 17-year-olds.

We used to have people pick their jobs. This eventually led them to regret their decision and cry about salary, workload, and boss troubles. So, the government made much required reforms.

We don't get the choice, and all the jobs are considered equally challenging and rewarding. Though the government says that, the people in the community all believe that becoming a TP official is the best job to earn. I, quite strongly, disagree with them.

On the sidelines of the newspaper, sales for discounted OG were posted from multiple markets. Our Onion-Goggles prevent our lachrymal glands from crying while we chop onions. Below the OG ads, the licensed eye doctors gave options for supplements and treatments for watery eyes.

The full newspaper held pictures of a group of smiling people, jokes to lighten up the day, and all the news that was irrelevant to the obstruction of free will. Of course, that I'm not allowed to mention.

Mother told me that all of them, including Father and probably Jaden, have their minds so wired into this society that they believe it could do nothing wrong. She told me I've got to think differently.

*"Don't mention, just believe."*

But then again, she also told me she'd return. I don't know what to believe.

My broken thoughts are interrupted by sudden fireworks. Jaden rushes out of his room and looks out the window in the hall.

"It's the funeral band!" he yells.

Jaden is always excited about the funeral bands.

The music works as an external rhythm to the heart. Every drumbeat reverberates through the soul. If only the drumbeats could revive the dead. That would make it true heartbeats.

We were told that there was a time when people wore black to a funeral and buried the person underground.

I can't imagine mourning death. The TP officials say that the people who pass on didn't really care about the ones left behind, and we should celebrate that they are much happier where they are.

But there are these thoughts in my brain that make me wonder about certain things that could surely put me in prison.

Like, what if the people who died didn't want to die?

*"Don't mention, just believe."*

Right.

I walked out to see the marching funeral band procession, quite a regularity these days, but it had brought all our neighbors out onto their lawns. The drum band was marching out in the front line, leading the family and the other relatives who joined. They all carried banners with the name "CHRISTINA" and had radiant smiles on their faces. They chanted "Christina, Happy Death Day!!" and all the neighbors cheered along to the crowd. If we didn't know better, we would have thought that they were singing Christmas carols.

"Come back in, Jaden. It's late," I remarked, tapping on his shoulders.

When he didn't oblige, I lifted him up, my arms using his armpits as an anchor, and carried him back in. When I fell asleep that night, it wasn't my mother's visions, the same drumbeats, or the guarding stars in the skies that kept me dreaming.

It was the prospect of tomorrow.

Tomorrow.

\* \* \*

10:00 a.m. (“Ecstatic” hour)

The next day, we all stood in the auditorium as people lined in. Representatives from the job industries waited in the front of the room for their recruits. One by one, I saw my friends walk to the front and pick up the tiny sheets of paper on the desk.

Lucy—eye specialist. A terrific option. She wanted to be TP, but seeing the smile on her face, I’m sure she was more than happy. Now that I’m thinking about it, she was always worried about how many carrots she ate.

Chris—drum marcher. I kind of guessed it already. His skills in the band at school were phenomenal.

Teacher, singer, newspaper editor, and many other professions were filling up. As each person went up, I slowly imagined what it would be like if I were picked for these occupations.

I realized that I didn’t have to imagine any longer. As the governor motioned me forward, I saw the envelope with my name on it.

I rubbed my sweaty hands on my jeans and smiled at the governor. I grabbed the letter and opened the seal.

My breath caught in my throat. I almost quit blinking. Realizing that this might cause tears in my eyes, I tightly shut my eyes before reading out my profession.

With a fake smile plastered on my face, I grabbed the mike from the governor.

“Tear-Prohibition official,” I read in my strongest voice.

I heard loud cheers from the audience, and all the other recruits from other jobs stood up to salute. With my shaking hands, I saluted back. I saw the proud smile of my dad and the ecstatic face of my five-year-old brother. I forced manners into my unheeding lips and smiled back at them.

\* \* \*

1:00 p.m. (“Euphoric” hour)

After all the other people had finished their job “decisions,” the TP officials gave us instructions. We were to receive a private guide, and each one of us were appointed to different sections (to limit hostility and competition).

As I leaned on one side wall, an official clad in a burgundy uniform strode up to me.

“I’m Jack,” the officer said, looking straight into my eyes.

“May.” I responded.

Jack nodded and began walking out of the auditorium. I diligently followed.

“We have little time, so we will get started right away. I’ll take you on a tour

of our building. It has three compounds. The first is the detection and alert system. The second is the deployment of our troops. The third is our extremely protected and well-guarded reform location.”

“You mean the prison system?” I clarified.

Jack turned to face me; his eyebrows crunched.

“We prefer the term reform system. We are bettering the individuals. Which I’m sure you are aware of. In fact, you are supposed to be employed at the reform center.”

I looked up at him, unsure of what to say. A million thoughts clouded my mind. Mother.

Would I see my mother? What would I say? Can I bring her back?

Jack coughed to clear his throat.

“We will allow you to walk through the prison at your own leisure with the entire trust that you of course would not use the methods of manipulation.”

I nodded.

“Wonderful. Let’s begin.”

After an extensive tour of the first two compounds, Jack led me into the prison—sorry—reform structure.

“Since only one person is allowed in at a time, I’ll let you go in. It’s just one circular hallway so you shouldn’t get lost, but if you do, ask any of the janitors.”

Jack slowly used his ID and plugged in the code. The numbers 00770 made unique music, soft to my ears.

The metal protected gate opened, and a narrow walkway led me into the hall.

To be entirely honest, the compound looked nothing like how I imagined it to be. The grey monotonous walls in my expectations were transformed into colorful rainbow prisms.

The ceiling was open, showing the skies with dotted stars.

I looked up. The stars. How pretty.

Mom would have liked this place if it weren’t funded by the government.

I heard sounds of laughter from the nearby rooms. The rooms were circular, so one could see all the patients by standing in the center. Each room had an open glass window so that everyone could see the huge “NOTIFICATION” board and the open skies.

Currently, news of Occupation Day filled the entire corkboard.

Next to the board were markers for the patients and the TP officials to communicate. I know I wasn’t supposed to communicate with anyone, but something tempted me. I wanted to find Mother.

To be entirely honest, I didn’t know how to.

I looked at the patients in all the rooms. Some had almost entirely reformed,

with nothing but a smile on their face. Others had gone wrinkled and old, most probably because they never learned.

I wondered if Mom had reformed.

Or did she already die?

The thought didn't let me move away from the board. I hesitantly grabbed the marker and wrote.

“DON'T MENTION, JUST \_\_\_\_\_”

I exhaled. If Mother was here, she would finish it. I heard slow whispers between confused people in the rooms. I waited, not knowing what to expect. I moved away from the board to a corner to see if anyone would finish it.

Within a couple of minutes, I heard the slow creak of a doorknob. An old fragile lady, who looked at the brink of her death, walked over to the board.

Her grey hair outlined the edges of her face. Her eyes were crinkled and small. I could see that her tears had caused her to age so tremendously. Another act of crying could likely kill her.

She slowly touched the letters. Grabbing the markers nearby, she wrote the letters “BELIEVE.”

My heart stopped beating. I dragged my feet to the center of the room. The old lady slowly turned and as soon as she looked at me, the corners of her lips turned up.

“Mother?”

“May—” she mouthed before collapsing onto the floor.

Amid shock and momentary paralysis, I heard the tune of the drum marchers. The rhythm reverberating. Much like a heartbeat.

The banners from her room were taken, as if they were expecting her to die soon. The TP officials walked inside to take her body.

My mother. Her flailing arms. Her piercing scream. Her last words. The frosty night skies. The millions of protective stars.

And then, an inexcusable thing happened.

A tear slowly escaped down my cheek. ■

# When Waves Come Calling

## POETRY

**Aniela Holtrop**, Grade 12, Freeport High School, Freeport, ME. Lisa Blier, *Educator*; Region-at-Large, *Affiliate*. Gold Medal, **One Earth Award**

Someday,  
I'll open my door,  
and there will be waves  
on the doorstep.

I'll say; hello  
and; I was expecting you.  
I'll let the ocean in,  
let it take over.

I'll pull the door wide  
open to the swell.  
I'll step aside easily  
and silence will pour in.

Water will seep  
into the butter carpet.  
The walls will turn  
green at the edges.

I'll watch,  
from the crimson couch  
as water climbs  
up my shins.

The TV will flicker  
and cut out  
before the reporter  
understands what happened.

The picture frame will  
bob on cobalt currents,  
reaching for the  
ceiling's embrace.

The periwinkle  
shadow-stained walls  
will be washed.  
Calm floating away.

As bubbles form  
from whispers,  
I'll know the heather sky  
will meet the sea above.

The sunbeams will be  
wrung from my house  
as it fills up with indigo.  
Quietly drowning. ■

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Inspired by the artwork:  
Hopper, Edward. *Rooms by the Sea*. 1951.  
Yale University Art Gallery, New Haven.

# Black Girl Magic

## SCIENCE FICTION & FANTASY

**Chinonye Omeirondi**, Grade 11, Cypress High School, Cypress, CA. Hiba Taylor, *Educator*; Region-at-Large, *Affiliate*. Gold Medal, **Ray Bradbury Award for Science Fiction & Fantasy**

From Obsidian: Literature & Arts in the African Diaspora 46.1 (Fall 2020)

### INCANTATION

Momma's hands are like smooth machinery, slender fingers sharpened with blood-red polish; they tug and twist with a loving rhythm, her red sharpness clicking against one another like stone on stone. She fondles Mara's hair like it's made of sickly gold, this mass of spiraling coils thicker than night, and her hands shine with fragrant oils and potions—a nauseating mixture she calls “Magic.” Momma rubs her aged palms together, fingers straight and rigid like prayer, and Magic sucks at her skin like quick, deep kisses. Mara sits against the seat cushion of a leather couch, her head well-behaved and still between Momma's legs. Her bottom aches, a rolling, knotted pain—Mara's sure her pelvis has long since molded with the polished floorboards, and she fantasizes of finished hair and freedom. Momma's knees tighten at Mara's sides. *Turn your head.* Mara obeys, turning her head sharply, attitude wafting off her skin in quiet tendrils. Momma ignores her. Mara brings her hand to her head and pats, searching for hair not yet bound by sharp fingers. Her face breaks out in a smile and she gives thanks to God—there's only one section left. Momma sucks her teeth. *Stop touching your hair. You'll mess up the Magic.* Mara jerks her hand away. Her own fingers, soft and square, shine with Magic now, and she wipes it off on her shirt. Mara hates the slickness it leaves behind, it's always thick and smooth, too much like blood.

Momma runs a fanged comb through Mara's last piece of hair, Magic-soaked from root to tip so that it sparkles, like shards of stars are tangled in her tight coils. She brings the hair to her lips and kisses. She smiles, and Magic outlines her mouth like cheap lip gloss. Momma's always loved her daughter's hair more than her daughter herself, for its unnatural length, for its volume, and for its strange beauty. Mara is young and naive, she hasn't yet noticed that Momma is a deranged woman.

Red sharpness resumes clicking, slender fingers twisting and turning until Mara's scalp screams *murder!*—Momma has finished the hair and Mara wipes her tears. Seven shining twists swing from Mara's delicate head, weighed down by red flower-shaped barrettes at the tips. The Magic leaves a glossy sheen along zigzagged paths of brown scalp, where Momma made loving parts. Momma beams at her creation.

The unloved daughter stands up and stretches. *Can I go outside and play now?* Her new friends are waiting for her.

## ENCHANTMENT

The sun burns and burns, a merciless heat, so hot that Mara sees the street bend and twist like Momma's sleeping body, and her zigzag paths of scalp threaten to light aflame. Mara pays no attention to the silly silly sun—her friends are speaking. Her friends are children of snow, snow hair and snow skin, and Mara loves them for their vibrant blue eyes and bone straight locks, golden like royalty. They circle her with bikes, Mara in the center, and shout at each other with snow teeth. *What game do you wanna play*, one asks. *I don't know*, says another. *Oh I know*, says Snow King, *let's play cops and robbers!* Snow One and Snow Two excitedly agree. The children of snow stop their circling and look at Mara. Mara gives them her very own snow smile, one that shines brighter than Magic, thick with love and adoration. The children of snow do not return it. Rather, they giggle and giggle. *Mara's the robber!* they scream.

The children of snow are compassionate, gracious children, and out of the kindness of their hearts, they give Mara a head start. Mara is convinced they are angels who've broken from stained glass, pretty and pale, they must've forgotten their halos when they descended from Heaven. Mara's legs, colored not with snow, but with shit, as the children of snow say, move with swiftness. She's the robber, the despicable criminal, and she runs and runs from her crime scene. After little time, the beautiful children chase after her. Their righteousness is blinding like the silly silly sun, and their cloaks of snow flow behind them like angel wings, holied with justice. A deep, ancestral fear blooms behind ribs. Mara, daughter of shit, propels her legs faster. Her shining twists

bounce with each step on cement, red barrettes clicking with rhythmic cadence quicker than Heaven's bells. Magic mingles with sweat and coats Mara's forehead like anointment. Snow King is close. Close enough to feel his divine breath. Mara feels a strong tug on a twist in the back of her head, the pull of a Goliath perhaps, and the force brings her bottom to pavement. Her smooth and square fingers burn on gravel. *Ew!* Snow King cries. *What is that stuff?* His snow palms are stained with a coloured sheen.

*It's Magic.*

The snow skin of his face contorts into a terrible, lovely grimace. *It's gross.*

Snow One and Snow Two come bounding forth in perfect grace, eager to reach the captured culprit. Snow King tells them of his disturbing discovery, and they too, reach for Mara's twists. *Ew!* they exclaim. *Gross! It's Magic,* Mara repeats. Her voice spikes at her last syllable, *-gic*. Mara's having trouble containing her anger at Momma for embarrassing her in front of her beautiful, beautiful friends.

*Magic doesn't exist,* says Snow King. *You're a liar, a gross liar.* The children of snow stare down at her from clouds, ready to cast divine judgment. *Robbers have to be punished.* They gift her snow smiles and reach for her brown body with fingers sharper than Momma's. Snow One and Snow Two pin Mara down on burning pavement, her arms a T, and the silly sun pierces her head like thorns. Snow King grabs his bike and places it beside Mara's young body. He intends to nail her to pavement with rubber tires and aluminum. Mara struggles and screams, and as she violently shakes her head, the red flower barrettes claw against the ground, like escape can be found beneath Earth. She screams for Momma until Snow King starts to scream with her—a horror-filled, ugly shriek, a strange noise coming from a saintly mouth. Mara looks up to find shining twists bursting from Snow King's right palm. They crawl up his arm, twisting and turning like red sharpness, like sentient snakes, slithering around his neck and replacing skin of snow with thick darkness. Snow One and Snow Two begin their own terrible cries, finding swinging twists hatching from their stained palms. They burst from every hole and crevice as if the bodies of angels could become colanders, bodies hunched over and vomiting sparkling twists rather than screams, pouring dark serpents from their lips. When the sound of spiraling, tightening coils is no more, the children of snow are motionless. They lay on the hot pavement with shining skin. They have twists for arms, legs, and organs, like dolls woven from hair, but red flower barrettes for eyes. A gentle wind threatens to blow them away.

*TA-DA!*

Mara stands under the golden light of the living room. Momma sits on the leather couch, facing her, in the spot where she showered kisses on coils. Tears pour from Mara's terrified eyes, leaving shining paths from eyelid to chin, and she holds three child-shaped bundles of twists in her arms. *I loved them*, Mara says. She stares at their plastic eyes. Mara is angry at Momma again.

Momma stands up and walks over to Mara. She gives her a brilliant, snow smile. *There, there*, she soothes. She takes the three bundles from Mara and cradles them in her loving arms. *There, there*. She rocks them so gently, like they were living children, so gently like sickly gold, this mass of spiraling coils thicker than night, and brings twisted foreheads to her lips for a motherly kiss. Magic outlines her mouth like cheap lip gloss. ■

# A Scholar on a Battlefield

## SCIENCE FICTION & FANTASY

**Sofia Schaffer**, Grade 10, Hopkins School, New Haven, CT. Lena Roy, *Educator*; Connecticut Writing Project, *Affiliate*. Gold Medal, **American Voices Medal**, **Ray Bradbury Award for Science Fiction & Fantasy**

There's a precious moment between the end of the fighting and the arrival of the clean-up squads when the battlefield is all empty and nobody's around to bother us. That's when we creep out from the bushes and get to work as fast as we can—'cause like I said before, the clean-up squads come in quickly after all the fighting's done to take away the bodies and the weapons.

I don't care for the battle itself very much, seeing as it's so loud and smells rancid. And even though I'm hidden away in the bushes I always end up thinking about the time my friend Dezer got hit by an wayward bullet and died while he was waiting in the undergrowth. But I don't mind that moment after the battle's over, when the yelling and the death-screams have stopped and the birds start to sing again. Still smells bad though. I breathe through my mouth as I work.

The battle was especially violent today, and the field is so crowded with ghosts that I'm forced to stare at my overlarge boots as I walk, watching them squish-squish-squish through the bloody grass. Ignoring the ghosts is pretty crucial to life on the front lines; you can go looney if you actually pay attention to them. Ghosts are like those faint stars in the night sky that you can only see out of the corner of your eye. They're always hovering right at the side of your vision, but they vanish wherever your gaze lands. I've found that staring at the ground or holding your hands next to your eyes like they're horse blinders helps you forget about them.

I notice a man in a royal blue uniform crumpled on the ground, so I hurry a few yards across the torn-up grass to claim him. Only the really high ranking officers wear blue uniforms, and they're stripped faster than you can say "this one's mine." I kneel beside the dead man, who's lying face down in the mud. Officers with blue uniforms usually come in on horseback, but since I don't see a fallen horse anywhere I'm guessing the man has been shot off his mount. Shame, that. Horse tack is always in demand, and people don't ask many questions about where you got it from.

When you're scavenging a battlefield, the first thing you learn is how to strip a body without attracting notice. I've gotten pretty good at it since I came down here two years ago. First I unfasten the medals of honor, most of which are honest-to-goodness silver and will fetch a pretty penny back at one of the army camps. Next I pop off some of his brass buttons, then the badges, then the fancy shoulder pieces—leaving the tassels of course, 'cause you can't buy mud with those. The uniform itself is much too bloodied to be worth anything more than a few coins, and it wouldn't fit in my pouch anyway. I leave it for a more desperate scavenger to find. The last thing I take is a dagger and sheath that was buried underneath the folds of his coat.

I've lingered over this body for too long, and my bulging sack is starting to attract some hungry looks from across the field. Time to move on. I tie up the sack in a tight knot to ensure that no sticky fingers find their way inside and swing it over my shoulder.

The nurses are coming out now, with their crutches and stretchers and bags of shiny medical tools. We scavengers pause in our work for a moment to shoot them hostile looks, which they return in kind. The nurses consider our work "despicable" and "insensitive"—their words, not mine—and they've been trying to chase us off the battlefield for as long as I've been here. Most of us hate the nurses because they sometimes make us hand back our prizes to be shipped to the corpse's nearest of kin. It's a stupid thing to do, I think. At least when we pawn them for money to fill our stomachs we're putting the knickknacks to good use. The family would just stuff them away in the attic and leave them to rot.

I've been staring at the ground to avoid the ghosts, so I practically stumble across the next body—a plain-clothes soldier with a big red stain all across his stomach. He's trembling something awful, like Death has taken him by the shoulders and is trying to shake his ghost out.

"Are you . . . an angel?" the man croaks. It takes me a moment to realize he's talking to me.

“Nah,” I say. I’m going to move on, but then I see something he’s got clutched in his shaking hand. A medallion—real gold. Shit. That medallion could buy me a month’s worth of food and a new blanket besides. I can’t take it now, though—don’t want the last thing this man sees to be some kid stealing his special trinket. Might get him upset. I’ve been haunted before and it is *not* fun. On the bright side, this man looks like he’s got one foot in the grave already. All I’ve got to do is wait.

“Of course . . .” says the man between wheezes. “An irrational assumption. When confronted with the unknowns of death . . . we interpret what we see to be all manners of nonsense. How utterly ridiculous, seeing an angel in a—” he squints at me for the first time, “—a grimy little boy.”

This one’s a talker.

“Sorry,” I say, all awkward-like. I’ve got no clue what he’s going on about.

“It’s hardly . . . your fault,” the soldier says. His body is spasming like a leaf in the wind. “If you are not an angel, then I am not doomed to perdition, and all is right with the world. Omitting my imminent death, of course. Death, however, holds no terrors for me . . . as I have made my living analyzing it.” Now he makes an effort to focus on me. “You have not, by any chance, read my book *The Principles of Matter and Their Relation to the Realm of the Afterlife*?”

“I can’t hardly read my name, sir,” I say.

“Can hardly . . .” he trails off, but this time I don’t know whether it’s in pain or surprise. “The access . . . to education among the impoverished . . . youth of our nation is abysmal.”

“Sure is,” I agree, although I’m starting to feel kind of stupid listening to this dying man with his big fancy words. I feel compelled to add, “But I know *some* stuff. Like, my friend Dezer, he taught me how to make my spit into a bubble and blow it off my tongue. I betchya don’t know how to do that.”

“I don’t,” admits the dying man. This makes me feel sorta proud, so I demonstrate for him. The bubble floats downward and disappears against the twitching, bloody fist in which he clutches the medallion.

“Where’d you get that?” I say, changing the subject and prodding his fist with my finger. If he bought it, maybe he’ll tell me how much it’s worth. I could use information like that to make sure I’m not cheated back at one of the army pawn shops.

“It’s my wife’s,” says the soldier. “She gave it . . . gave it to me before I left. She’s one of the superstitious sorts that . . . still believes gold keeps the ghost fastened to the body.” He breaks off into a hacking cough.

He’s lying, that much is obvious—you don’t live on your wits for five years without learning to read body language—but I really don’t care why. He could

have stolen the medallion from the Emperor himself for all it matters to me; as long as it's made of real gold, I'm satisfied.

"Fat a lot of good it's doing," I say instead. Maybe I'm being harsh, but if this man is half as smart as he puts on, he'll already know he's got bare minutes left.

Through his violent coughs, I think I hear a sort of choked laugh.

"You're not one to tiptoe around the truth," he croaks. "No, don't apologize. You have the makings of a proper scholar. That's what being an academic is all about after all—finding logic in the illogical. Seeking . . . seeking the truth."

I blink, surprised. I try to imagine myself as a scholar, holding a stack of books, saying something clever and serious. *In this instance the blergosphere counteracts Efferson's eighth law of Math-Stuff.* I snort out loud. For such a smart man, this soldier is positively stupid.

"Scholars are people with beards and fountain pens and deegrees," I say, scathingly. "Not people like me." Dezer told me about "deegrees." He said that they're special awards that universities give to people when they get smart enough. I've never seen a deegree before, not even in the pawnshops where all sorts of old prizes wind up—medals and trophies and plaques. I wonder what one would look like.

"Oh, child, no, those things do not define an intellectual," says the soldier. "I am a scholar everywhere I go. Although they may have shaved my beard and taken my pens when I was drafted, my mind is something they cannot take away from me." He makes a sort of smile, and blood leaks from his mouth. He looks so pathetic, twitching there, his coat all muddy and his chin dripping red and a wet stain on the front of his pants. I fight the urge to slit his quivering throat.

"Nobody's a scholar on a battlefield," I say. "There's too much fear. There are too many ghosts."

"I'm afraid you have missed the point, young man," says the dying soldier. "I have been a scholar all my life. I know that when you die, your internal consciousness undergoes a combustion reaction from conceptual to spectral, because I quite literally wrote the book on the topic." Now he makes a sort of painful wheeze. "My brain has been honed by years of scientific study. I will not cave to primitive superstition."

Keeping up this argument isn't really worthwhile to me, so the best course of action is to switch tactics. I nod in agreement.

"Yeah. I reckon you're right."

"Remember this, child," the soldier says, and his voice is tight with pain. "Ghosts are simply a chemical combustion reaction in response to the shut-down of bodily organs, whereupon the spectral image is projected until the

body decomposes, like fire vanishing when the wood is burnt through. That is the only death. Ghosts do not fade to paradise like the Emperor's men would have you believe, those cretins who tore me from my work to fight their pointless border wars. They are fools, and they are wrong."

I drum my fingers on my knee. This man is taking longer to kick the can than he has any right to. I can already hear the chatter of the clean-up squads in the distance. If I hadn't already been safely loaded up with such good loot, I would have sped up his special combustion reaction a long time ago—haunting be damned. If only there was a way to get him to drop the gold without having to take it from him. The beginnings of an idea begin to stir in my mind.

"I dunno," I say, cool as you'd please. "Seems to me you've still got that medallion in your hand. That's awful religious of you, innit?"

The soldier reddens, and I smile a secret triumphant grin. "My wife gave it to me!" he says, defensively. "I keep it to remind myself of her. She's the religious one, not me. I am a scholar. I am a man of science."

"You're a dirty rotten liar," I say. "You close your eyes and act real nervous whenever you say the medallion's from your wife. Fess up. It's your lucky charm. You brought it 'cause you were scared of dying. Scared and superstitious."

The soldier's mouth opens to defend himself. "I'm not," he whispers. "I'm not."

I jerk my chin up. "Prove it."

The soldier pulls back his shaking arm, and after a single moment of fraught hesitation, he flings his fist forward and releases his hand. The medallion flies in an arc through the hot and reeking air, shiny gold against the blue sky. There is a plop as it hits the mud a few feet from my boots.

"There," says the soldier. His tone is satisfied, relieved even, but there is a certain wavering tremor to it. "Would a superstitious man do that?"

I am busy removing the medallion from the muck. The gold shines as I rub the mud off on my jacket cuff. The front side has the etching of a ghost on it, eyes wide and mouth agape, which I recognize as a lucky symbol for keeping your ghost from fleeing. Glory be, this is a nice piece. I'll make a scavenger's fortune at the pawnshop. "No, sir," I say, sliding the medallion into my jacket's breast pocket where I can be sure it'll stay safe. "I guess you're a man of science after all."

I hear a quiet moan, and I look up. The man's convulsing body has finally gone limp and still, though his bloodstained chest is still heaving. I lean over him, and his gaze catches mine. His eyes are tortured, full of fear and dread.

"Oh God," I hear him breathe. "Oh God, oh God."

His head lolls backwards onto the muddy grass, his horrified eyes gone dull.

What a drawn-out affair. Those who die instantly are the luckiest, I'd say.

I reach out and pluck a hanky from the dead man's pocket—there's no real place for me to wash handkerchiefs, so I need a new one every few days. I slide it into my pocket with the medallion. The sound of the clean-up squads has gotten louder, and I realize the other scavengers have already vanished from the battlefield. Time for me to clear out too.

As I start to walk away, I catch a glimpse of the dead soldier's ghost in my periphery. I think he's looking in my direction, but he makes no move to follow me. Thank goodness—being haunted really is the worst. I give him a little wave to say thanks for the medallion and the conversation. I hope that the soldier's ghost is less stressed than the man was, now that he's finally finding his answers.

I blow a spit bubble off my tongue as I walk away, and the wind carries it somewhere behind me. A storm is brewing. I may not know the first thing about combustion reactions or paradise, but I do know that this medallion's worth enough to buy me a proper sleeping shelter for waiting out the rain. ■

# Gold and Silver Medal Awards

Students in grades 7–12 may submit works in 11 writing categories. This year, regional programs selected more than 4,200 writing submissions for Gold Keys, and these works were then adjudicated at the national level by authors, educators, and literary professionals. Gold and Silver Medals were awarded to works of writing that demonstrated originality, technical skill, and the emergence of a personal voice.

# Eden

## SCIENCE FICTION & FANTASY

**Joelle Lamaie**, Grade 10, Brandeis High School, San Antonio, TX. Shari Tracy, *Educator*; Region-at-Large, *Affiliate*. Gold Medal

Ma says I was still tied to her chest when the last big war came home. Says I was barely eating mush when fires took our food. They were big fires, she says. Big enough to leave the whole world hungry, big enough to leave the whole world dead. Big enough to take Papa, too. Ma always smiles at that part—says his life wasn't worth living, anyway.

We're lucky, Ma says. Lucky to wander on seas of black ash. Lucky to breathe. When dinner's ants, we're lucky. If dinner's beetles, God exists.

Ma says our hope's the soldiers who survived the nuclear explosions and fires. Talks about them in her stories about the last big war. Says they're atoning for their sins. Riding around in decaying military vehicles, saving people. Taking them to a haven. Calling themselves the Global Regrouping Organization. Ma says she's willing to forgive them so long as they take us, too.

Even though I don't remember it, Ma says that I've already met the Sun. That when the fires started and the sky went to sleep and Papa died, that the foolish kings brought the Sun home. For the second time, they tried to build a tower to Heaven. This time, it buried them alive.

The prettiest stories are about Earth Before. When I wasn't tied to Ma's chest yet and when Papa wasn't dead yet. Those stories have shimmering seas, sapphire skies, emerald grass. Ma says Earth Before had a beating heart. That it kept the foolish kings alive. I once asked Ma what made the kings of Earth Before so foolish, anyway. They couldn't be worse than Papa, the way she talks about him.

Ma laughed. That they were once just like you and me.

Even though it feels like it, Ma and I haven't been alone for nine years. Sometimes we run into others along our river. Ma says I was little when she joined a couple strays like us. Promised her food. Protection. They traveled two days before she woke one night and found them tying me up like a pig to the slaughter. She always says don't trust the others.

Some days, like today, our walking-and-breathing path has a corpse. One of the unlucky poisoned by the river. Her eyes are glazed over. Her skin's blue. She's still breathing, not even a corpse yet. Ma says, It's too late for her, son. The poison's already got her. The woman's thrashing upward, her arms and head jerking towards us, every nerve crying out for help. I can't look away, so Ma covers my eyes for me, her hands shaking against my brow. Ma's dirty palms sting my eyes, just enough to make me cry.

The woman stills. We pile the ash for her. Ma prays.

I think of the kings of Earth Before. If they knew. If they knew in its final breath, blue flesh would reach out for a glimpse at the stars. If they knew the Sun was so much hotter than they ever fathomed. If they knew it would just be me and Ma for miles and miles and miles and miles.

That night, when I ask, Ma says history repeats itself. I wonder, this, us—will we be history someday? Ma tells me to quiet down. That hope is a dangerous thing to have around here.

Or maybe not.

There's light.

In the distance.

It's too bright to be fire, and besides—fire doesn't burn in ash.

Light!

Past the mounds of black sand, past the corpses and the stories and the beetles and the ever-burning fire.

I grab Ma. Light!

We scream and jump. We're here! We're alive

We're alive!

A mechanical beast out of Ma's stories approaches, with great wheels that leave tracks in the ash, that crush the makeshift headstone of a diseased body Ma and me never buried because the poison spreads too easy, son. Broken-down machines of the kings of Earth Before are as abundant on Earth After as skeletons, but this one roars with life. The people inside it do, too.

"Are you diseased?" a uniformed woman shouts from her grumbling throne.

"No!" Ma yells back. "Clean! We are clean!"

“Prove it.” She holds up her gun. “And stay where you are.” I can almost see her cold, unfeeling eyes, even in the darkness. The eyes of survival and death, one and the same.

Ma holds up her sandy arms, every movement slow and cautious. Clean. Pulls back her dirt-hued hair to reveal her neck. Clean. Her eyes, mud-brown. Clean. Opens her mouth of rotting bones. Clean. The white light doesn’t leave any room for questions.

“Please,” Ma begs. “I have a boy. A young boy.” I’ve never seen Ma beg before.

As they approach us, only silhouettes in the light of the truck, I see three letters on their badges: G.R.O.

The trip to the haven’s three days. When we arrive, the soldiers lead us through a ravaged building. It used to be a museum—a place full of the past, they say. Now, it holds our future. Down, under the ash and rubble, is a garden. They’ve spent the last ten years creating an artificial light greenhouse, and now, they’re almost done. I don’t know what those words mean, but Ma cries.

There are rows and rows of green sprouts encased in glass, hope shrouded in violet light.

They call it Eden.

Quenching Eden’s thirst is an irrigation system that runs along the ceiling. It’s six times the size of Eden. Got four hundred people from the region. *Four hundred people.* Ma takes my hand as one runs by. Her skull’s the same as mine, like some of the faces in the sand. But her bones are anything but brittle.

Ma doesn’t sleep all night. I don’t either. She says it’s been too long since there were others. Since she was surrounded by laughter and tears and voices, so many voices that aren’t hers or mine. Too long since the heat that scorched her skin was human.

Ma’s wary of the others at first. But she talks with the others who have bones as big as hers. She says, Go, son. Take back the childhood the foolish kings stole. So I find the girl with life in her. She teaches me to run. And run and run.

For five years I run with the girl called Eve beneath the lightless expanse. She teaches me to hold my breath. Teaches me to love everything that’s dead and dark and decayed. Eve’s my only friend, but she’s enough. Eve’s got a heart mined from the core of Earth Before.

For her birthday, she wants to see the surface. Like we’ve done every year. The first time, I’d caught her opening the emergency escape hatch. She took me with her to keep me shut up. Everyone else’d been huddled together trying to fix the air-conditioning. It took me a while to realize it wasn’t a coincidence. This time she’s sabotaged our water. Says we’ve got a few hours until they figure it out.

On the surface, my memories come flooding back like the poisoned rivers. The ash I grew up in is thinner somehow. Like it was blown away during my years underground. And the sky. Black as the oil that feeds the beasts, as it's always been. Drains all hope I had of ever seeing the stars. I feel Eve's eyes on me. She pats a spot in the ash beside her. "Sit."

I do as she says.

"What if I told you I know what the stars look like?" Her eyes sparkle.

"Then you're lying," I say.

A hint of sadness crosses her face. Maybe regret for mistakes she didn't make. "Hold out your hands." She fills them with ash. The ash that stains my past and paints my future. "What do you see?"

I hesitate and she laughs at my confusion, laughs with enough force to blow the clouds away and clear the sky. "I mean what do you *see*? *Deeper*."

I poke around in it with my finger. "There's some metal in here. Crushed glass. Makes it shine."

She looks down at her own dark hands. Buries them in the sand. "We are surrounded by remnants of Antebellum Earth. Er, what do you call it?" She answers her own question before I get the chance to respond. "Earth Before. The ash's full of their places, their—" She takes a breath. "People. It's full of their love, their hate, their joy, their sadness. It doesn't shine because it has glass. It shines because it's alive."

"You're crazy." There's nothing living on the surface lands of Earth After except people who are almost dead.

Her voice softens. "We're alive, too. You shine because you carry your mother's stories. Because you've loved what you've never seen. You shine because among all the death and destruction you've chosen to live. You've clung to the hope of seeing the impossible, and it's brought you here."

She takes my hand. She's warmer than anything I've known. "We are the stars of Earth After. The glass in the ash. The last hope."

I hold my breath. I hold it until everything takes the color of the sky. Eve's full of words. I'm full of other people's words. Ma's. Eve's. I want to keep her here forever. To never breathe her out or let her go.

Screams pierce my thoughts.

Eve's on her feet before I turn my head. "You hear that?"

I swallow the fear rising in my throat. "I, um. Probably nothing."

"No, I definitely heard something. Someone. They need help." She scans the area. Quickly, purposefully. "There, I see them!"

She runs. I trail behind. Dread weighs me down.

The voice is from another victim of the poison. He's suffocating under the weight of his own lungs. Gasping for help with every breath he has left. His arms reach for the sky. The convulsions have already begun. I recognize the final stage before—

His hands crash down, his body going limp.

Eve cries out. Rushes to his side. I hold her back. It spreads too easy, I tell her. She doesn't care. She kneels beside his body. Covers her hand with the fabric of her shirt. Checks his pulse. I stay farther away. Say there's nothing she can do.

"You're wrong," she says. "I can give him a proper burial. It's the least I can do." She turns to me with tears in her eyes. "Find something to dig with. We don't have much time before they fix the water supply."

I wander off to find something to dig with and settle on some piece of Earth Before machinery. Eve's still by the body. Muttering something I can't quite make out. She reaches down with her shirt to close his eyelids. The look in his eyes before he died is burned into my memory. Bloodshot, terrified. Then void. I'm glad they're shut.

She screams.

I drop my makeshift shovel. His eyes are open again. His rotting hand on hers. She pulls away. Crying, squirming. But he has put all his strength into one last sentence.

"The fires," he gasps, "the fires of Antebellum Earth are burning." Once again, he's gone.

Eve falls back into the ground, clutching her arm. The blisters and the blue, horrid, acid rot have already begun. She's gasping, suffocating beneath the anticipation of what she knows is coming.

Eve.

Think. Think. Think!

I'm sorry. "Eve." I'm so, so sorry. "I'm going to get help. I'll—" I choke. "I'll come back."

She smiles. Gives me her trust.

Just like she taught me, I hold my breath.

And run.

I know I can't open the hatch without Eve. I run through the front. Push past security guards. I cry for help. Swallow it. Try again. "Eve needs help!" But my voice is lost in the laughter and talk.

I remember something she said about the Chief. How she was a mother to Eve when she didn't have one anymore. I know where she is.

Surrounding pipes in the open wall stand the Chief and three guards, all focused on undoing Eve's trick. I run into her, breathless. Shake her arms. "Eve."

She grabs my shoulders. Leans down until our eyes meet. "Where?"

I choke on my salty, sandy saliva. "The surface."

The Chief needs no explanation. "What are you waiting for?"

I lead them through where we were stars, through the ash, to the place where Eve writhes in pain beside another corpse. The rot is crawling up her arm. Reaching for her shoulder. Soon, her heart.

I can tell the Chief's put the pieces together. She kneels beside her. Cradles her head, careful not to touch her arm. Eve melts into her. The Chief plants a kiss on her forehead. Gets back up again. Eve's cry makes me shiver.

The Chief turns to us. "We go."

My heart drops. "Go? You mean we're leaving?"

"There's nothing we can do." She runs her hand over her face. "There's no cure for this."

Anger stirs in my chest. "We could take her back. Help her there."

"And put everyone down there at risk?" My eyes fall. The ash mocks me. I look up at her again. The eyes of survival and death, one and the same. "She's got a bad case of it, worse than any I've seen. I say she's got two days at most."

Fire burns behind my eyelids. She turns away. "We're just gonna leave her to die?" My voice rises. "I won't leave her to die!"

But they're already gone.

The haven's been silent since we returned. My head's full of sand. Ma tells a story. But I can't hear. I can't see. I just breathe. They're punishing me for leaving, like what happened to Eve isn't punishment enough. Next two weeks, I'm on greenhouse duty. I'll spend every night logging the rations leaving Eden.

Tonight's the first shift. I push through the glass doors. Feel the guards' eyes on me. The boy who killed Eve.

I drop my backpack. Open the logbook. Her voice replays in my mind. Her face on the page. Her sandy eyes in every face I see.

She's still alive. Alone.

Hungry.

I gauge my chances. The guards outside are facing away, talking. There's one inside. Meant to keep an eye on me. I let my pencil roll off the table and rummage through my bag for another. I have bandages, a flashlight. Matches.

I grab the logbook and walk through the rows of plants. I catch his gaze and make some marks. There are beans, snap peas, tomatoes, strawberries. Eve loves strawberries. In the last row, I light a match. Drop it in the plants. I walk

until the fire's consumed a tomato plant. Then I yell. "Guards! There's a fire! Row 40!"

The guard inside blows his whistle. The rest rush in. "Row 40! Water must have come in contact with an exposed wire."

Water? Eve was right. They must've fixed the pipe. "I'll get help." I make my way toward the door. Stop by row 13. Fill my bag with strawberries, much as it can carry. Then I run.

It's too dark outside to see. I reach for the flashlight in my bag and switch it on. When I reach her, Eve's got her head back in the sand. Sleeping with her mouth open. She's muttering gibberish. Even in her sleep, she groans in pain. I can't wake her.

I lay my jacket over her. I'm shaking so much I can barely do it right. I lay out the bandages from my bag. Spread out the strawberries. Leave.

"Hey."

Ash fills my shoes as I turn back to face her. "You're awake."

Her voice is small. "You didn't say bye."

"I brought you some food."

Her eyes follow my gesture. She smiles, but her eyes are empty. "Strawberries. My favorite."

I want to tell her, *I set Eden on fire for you. I was brave.* "Eve."

"Yeah?"

"Wait for me up there. With—" I can't finish it. "With—"

She laughs. All the sand in my head pours out. "With the stars. I got it."

My eyes burn. "Goodbye."

Nothing. ■

# Always and Forever

## SCIENCE FICTION & FANTASY

**Sonia Mehta**, Grade 11, Dublin Jerome High School, Dublin, OH. Tim Flora and Maria Kuznetsova, *Educators*; Belin-Blank Center, *Affiliate*. Gold Medal

*Knock.* I pushed my head further into the pillow. *Knock.* The vibrations penetrated my skull. *Knock.* I surrendered, slipped on a robe, and opened the front door. The world's most annoying human looked into my eyes.

"Hope I didn't wake you up, sir," said my grad student.

"It's past midnight, Ryan."

"I know. But you said to see you right away if it was important." She walked past me into my house.

"I don't remember saying that. But since you're here, have a seat."

The tall, wiry graduate student plopped down on my leather chair. She pushed her tortoise-shell glasses onto her forehead and began.

"I'm working on the telomere chapter for our Cellular Aging textbook."

"I know." I held back my impatience.

"I followed your suggestion to include Professor Sebastian."

Dr. Sebastian had been my mentor at Cornell until her passing ten years earlier. In 1978, she had been months shy of publishing her groundbreaking research about the role of telomere shortening as a cause of aging but had been scooped by Dr. Alphonse at Yale. The Nobel Prize for medicine in 1998 would have been shared with Dr. Sebastian had she published a few weeks earlier.

"Why does that bring you here at two in the morning?" I stared at the antique walnut clock.

"I found something amazing."

"In that case, I'll pour us a drink."

“No, thanks,” Ryan replied.

“By ‘us’ I mean ‘me’.”

From my liquor cabinet, a corner nook carved into a wall, I removed a bottle of Hendrick’s gin. I did not care for whiskey or wine. They tasted like wood barrels. Fellow scientists invented gin. I poured the rose-petal-and-cucumber-infused spirit into a glass.

“Okay, Ryan. Tell me what’s so amazing.”

“I went through Sebastian’s early journals.”

“We still have them?”

“Yes, in the basement of the science library. I wanted to learn how she discovered the nature of telomeres. I had to go back years and found some entries about a lecture given by another grad student on cellular aging.”

“Why’s that amazing?”

“This other student, also a young woman, talked about the cap at the end of stem-cell genes. She told the Biology Department that the caps progressively became smaller and that caused the Hayflick Limit.”

“She’s talking about the telomeres. All that’s known,” I said. “Dr. Shelly at Yale discovered that.”

“This other student told the audience that she had done research at Syracuse. She found that cancer cells could stop the shortening. She spoke about experimental chemotherapies that might prevent the inhibition of telomerase.”

I stiffened. This was unexpected.

“There’s a theory that the gene that produces telomerase also transcribes a brake. If the brake could be stopped—”

“Cells would never age,” Ryan finished my sentence. “Immortality.”

“But Ryan, this theory just came out. There is no proof yet. Cancer cells can produce telomerase. But we can’t.”

“This grad student claimed she’d found a way. Apparently, the rest of the department was skeptical. She had no proof. Just theory.”

“If she only had theories, what’s the amazing part, Ryan? The journal must not be as old as you think.”

Was I too harsh with her? I liked her and was proud to be her mentor. Several colleagues had questioned my support of her Ph.D. application.

“She may be smart but really irritating,” said one professor.

“I can’t tell if she’s a man or a woman. With the spiky hair and piercings,” said another.

I paid no heed. Though narrow-focused, Ryan was as tenacious as a pitbull. Once she had bitten into an idea, there was no letting go. I realized her value when the two of us had presented our research on slowing cell aging at a con-

ference in Manhattan six months ago. Her talk had been brilliant. Several peers had congratulated us. There had been one critic. A young tall and attractive woman with piercing blue eyes, prominent cheekbones, and long dark hair had approached us.

“You say the day may come when aging can be halted?” she asked.

“In theory,” I answered.

“Have you considered the damage that might do?”

“No,” I responded, “but I see a lot more upside.”

“So did Prometheus. Mankind was punished for his deed with Pandora’s box. You’re opening it.” The young woman had spun on her heels and left.

“Who was she? She wasn’t wearing a name tag,” I asked Ryan.

“I’ve never seen her before. I thought you knew every molecular cell biologist.”

“Don’t know her. I wouldn’t have forgotten meeting someone with those intense eyes.”

Finally, Ryan answered, “You ask what’s amazing?”

I nodded.

“We know that telomeres were discovered in ‘78.” Ryan reached into her backpack for a tattered notebook. “This is one of Dr. Sebastian’s journals. It was in the library.”

I considered asking if she had permission to remove the papers but thought better of it. Ryan flipped through the journal and held a page in front of me.

“This is the first reference to the mystery student, look at the date.”

I stared in disbelief.

“It has to be a mistake,” I stammered, taking a generous swallow of the gin. “April 27, 1960. How is that possible?” It was like finding out that a student had formed the Theory of Relativity in the 1800s. “Ryan, who is this person?”

“Now it gets stranger. According to Sebastian’s notes, the grad student was named Valeria Danziger. She was dismissed by the department right after her presentation. They thought her work was more science fiction than science.”

“Not surprising.”

“I went to the fourth floor of the Physical Science Building. That’s where they store the yearly Biology Department faculty and grad students’ photos.”

“There should be over twenty with me,” I interjected.

“There is one for every year since 1910. One year is missing—”

“1960?”

“Exactly. But I went to the Office of Personnel and found the records from that year.”

Ryan reached into her backpack again and held out a manila folder. I took it and saw the graduate student application dated January 6, 1960, for Valeria

Danziger. At the bottom of the page was a black and white photo. A jolt ran up my spine. I held onto the desk to steady myself.

“Maybe, it’s a relative,” I offered.

Ryan shook her head. “Look at the eyes.”

There was no mistaking the piercing gaze of the young woman who had questioned us at the Manhattan conference. Bangs framed the face in the photo. Other than that, the woman had not changed or aged at all.

“We must find her,” I said.

\* \* \*

One week later, we sat in the lobby of the NYC Downtown Marriott, the location of our previous conference. I nursed a glass of Plymouth gin and glanced around at the rectangular yellow columns and the orange Statue of Liberty painting.

“Well, this has been a waste of time,” Ryan said.

We had spent days interrogating the conference sponsors at Cornell Weill, the hotel manager, the valet captain, and the head of security. So many false stories to explain the urgency of our questions had come from our lips, that I had almost forgotten our true purpose in being here.

“Not a total waste.”

“How so, Professor?”

“The woman we know as Valeria attended the conference under a fake name—”

“Railey Sangbeth. I googled her and came up as empty as when I searched for Valeria Danziger.”

“She paid in cash. She didn’t pay for parking. She left by cab. But the address was fake.”

“So, how was this not a waste of time?”

“Valeria went through a lot of effort to hide. That means she has something worth hiding.”

Ryan was not paying attention. She was looking at the lobby door.

“Ryan?”

“Sorry, Professor. I was looking at the valets. See how they are helping people in and out of cabs?”

“So?”

“My cousin valeted at the Swissotel in Chicago. They had all kinds of ways to make extra money. One of them was getting kickbacks from taxi companies.”

“Why would they pay the valets? Don’t valets just hope to get tips when they put bags in the cabs? I thought the cabs just lined up.”

“They do. And if it’s a standard trip to the airport, it’s first available. But if there’s an extra-large group or a longer trip, the head valet calls for a different

taxi. There's more profit in those rides. The valets get their share."

"How does that help us?"

"We know Valeria took a taxi from here. She gave a fake address to the hotel but must have changed it when she got into the taxi. Someone logged the address."

"Ryan, we already spoke to the head valet."

"Not with money."

I handed her a one-hundred-dollar bill and waited. Holding the Plymouth gin to my nose, I inhaled the lemon-rosemary scent. Some time later, a piece of hotel stationery appeared in front of my face with Ryan's handwriting.

"1670 Tarrymore Drive, Long Island." Ryan grabbed my glass and gulped some gin. "Found her!"

"Really?"

"When there's money involved, people keep records."

\* \* \*

"Valeria could have owned Wall Street. Had she gone public," Ryan remarked as we drove through Wall Street.

"She must have had her reasons," I replied.

Alfonse was awarded the Nobel Prize for a discovery that Valeria had made two decades earlier. The implications to her other findings were beyond my imagination. I needed to know her reasons.

"I hope we can get her this time," Ryan muttered.

"Get her?" She's not a criminal."

"It's a crime to hide such knowledge . . . and fortune."

"No, Ryan. The only crime is not pursuing science that might make the world better."

\* \* \*

An hour later we parked down the street from 1670 Tarrymore.

"Could've been a mansion," Ryan said.

We assessed the plain two-story colonial surrounded by a grey wooden fence. There was little landscaping: a few shrubs and a patch of grass. Ryan and I entered the gate, half expecting a trap door to land us in an underground cave. Instead, we stood in front of an antique oak door with three diagonal rectangular windows. I pressed the doorbell and waited. No answer. I banged on the wood. The door opened an inch. Behind the chain bolt was an outline of a feminine nose. The woman said nothing.

"Valeria, may we speak with you a moment?"

No response.

"I'm sorry to intrude, but it's important."

Silence.

“Valeria, I’m—”

“I know who you are. Both of you. Please leave me alone.”

Ryan blurted, “We’ve been through your work at Syracuse and Cornell. We know all about the chemotherapy. And the telomeres. And the enzymes.”

I marveled at Ryan. She had presented all that we knew but made it sound like it was only the tip of our knowledge.

“Ms. Danziger,” I said, “my colleague, though well-intentioned, is being misleading. We have only a small sense of the wonders you discovered. We’ll leave if you want. I owe you that. But I can’t keep silent about what we’ve learned. I owe science that.” I held my breath.

The latch scraped against its metal cradle. The door opened. I looked into the intense blue eyes and youthful face of Valeria Danziger, a woman who stopped aging sixty years ago.

She led us into her living room lined with bookshelves. They were filled with scientific textbooks and journals. Valeria motioned to an L-shaped couch. Ryan and I sat at the corner. Valeria remained standing.

“Would it make a difference if I asked you not to reveal my work?”

“It would make a difference,” I said.

“Not to me. I can’t pass the money and fame of our discovery,” Ryan said.

“Our?” Valeria echoed.

“I discovered you,” Ryan replied.

Our host retrieved a bottle of liqueur from a shelf. Tetteris, I read. She poured a dash into a crystal glass, returned, and sat on a leather chair.

“Valeria,” I said, “tell us about your discovery.”

“I was working on a chemotherapy at Syracuse. I found one that blocked the mRNA that caused a breaking feedback loop—”

“On the telomerase?” Ryan asked.

“Yes. That stopped the telomeres from shortening. But it was toxic. Most animals died. If I gave it in small amounts over weeks, the toxicity decreased. My professors weren’t interested.”

“You wound up taking the drug?” I asked.

She nodded. “They told me to destroy it. You already know I was fired after my presentation at Cornell.”

“Valeria,” I said, “what have you been doing all these years?”

“When I realized I stopped aging, I had to move every few years to avoid suspicion. In those days, getting false identification papers was easier. The digital age has caused me many problems.”

“You’ve been alone all these years?”

“Mostly.” She leaned over and held out a framed photo: a black-and-white portrait of a handsome man with a thin mustache and dark cropped hair. “I married Edgar in 1970. I told him about my secret a week before our wedding. We decided to give him the drug. We wanted to age, or to not age, together.” She paused and smelled the drink in her glass. “Four weeks after our wedding, Edgar developed several swollen lymph nodes. The lymphoma killed him. My work killed him within a month. That’s when I realized the horror of my discovery.”

“How does the telomerase activation reverse aging?” Ryan asked. “The telomerase action is only in stem cells.”

“The stem cells become charged. They activate autophagy in any weakened or damaged somatic cell. Then they replace that cell with a new one.”

“That’s how you are able to reverse aging,” Ryan said.

“Halt it, not reverse it.”

“Valeria, why didn’t you go public? You were scoffed at in the beginning. But you proved your theories were right,” I said.

“Only in me. And some lab rats. It’s not just the normal stem cells that become invincible. All of them do. Including the ones with genetic mutations.”

“Causing tumors.” I realized. “That’s what happened to Edgar.”

She nodded.

“We have PET scans. High-tesla MRIs. We can detect those mutations. It’d be worth it for the possibility of ending death,” Ryan argued.

“I’m not immortal. I’m only immune to natural causes of death. I’m resistant to infections, most cancers, and some toxins.”

Ryan narrowed her eyes. “You can’t hide the greatest scientific finding.”

“There are over seven billion people on this planet. If we eliminate most deaths, the population would explode beyond our resources,” Valeria said.

“The treatment doesn’t have to be given to everyone,” Ryan said.

“So who gets it? Do we go by IQ? Wealth? Nationality? How would those left behind react? Not peacefully,” Valeria said.

“Valeria, there’s more to it. One reason why nothing is done about problems like global warming is because people know they won’t be around to face the consequences. If we knew we’d have to clean up our own mess and not pass it down for future generations . . . we’d do better,” I said.

Ryan added, “It’s going to come out eventually. This way we could control it. I deserve my share of money and credit.”

“Ryan, this is wrong. It’s not our discovery,” I said.

“I found her. Fleming didn’t invent penicillin. He just found it.”

Valeria stood up and walked to the shelf containing the liqueur bottles. She filled two more glasses with the amber liquid and gave one to Ryan and me. She

lifted her own untouched glass. “Tetteris made on Chios Island in Greece from green almonds. I once told you, you were opening Pandora’s box, Professor. The last thing in Pandora’s box was hope. Let’s hope we do the right thing.” Valeria raised her glass and swallowed her drink in one gulp.

Ryan followed. I was about to take a sip when Valeria deftly swung her arm and knocked the glass from my hand. It shattered on the floor. Ryan and I stared in confusion. Ryan began turning red.

“Chlorotoxin. Dyskinesia is the first symptom,” Valeria said.

“Poison. Why?” I asked. “We were no threat.”

“You’re not. Ryan was blinded by money and fame. She didn’t see the chaos. The pain of loneliness. I’m frozen in time while those around me moved on with their lives. All my friends are in their eighties or dead. They got to experience life’s cherished moments. Share the tragedies. In the end, they had their loved ones to hold their hands when they passed on. The fragility of life makes it precious. Ryan only saw glory.”

Ryan slumped in her chair. Her eyes closed.

“I’ll call 911,” I said.

“She’s already gone. I won’t be far behind.”

“Why did you spare me?”

Valeria’s hands began to tremble. Her eyelids drooped.

“You will find my journal in the top drawer of my desk. It contains all my work. Now you are Prometheus holding the secret of fire.”

Valeria fell to the floor. I stared at the bodies.

An hour earlier, I would have trusted my life to Ryan. The temptation had overwhelmed her.

I didn’t think about Ryan. Or Valeria. Or the explanation I would need to give to the police. I thought about Prometheus and the gift of fire. ■

# Street Vendors and Empty Promises

## CRITICAL ESSAY

**Elio Torres**, Grade 11, Stuyvesant High School, New York, NY. Maura Dwyer, *Educator*; NYC Scholastic Awards, *Affiliate*. Gold Medal

For the successive months after the pandemic first presented itself in New York City, we ate our favorite restaurant entrees out of plastic takeout containers, with cloth-bundled silverware exchanged for single-use cutlery and a bottomless bag of napkins. The time when we would again be served in-person platters and aromatic spreads no longer seemed within close reach. As we patiently endured springtime in the city, counties in Connecticut and New Jersey gradually received an okay to reopen dining services, while New York City eateries watched in understanding but deep envy. Days under lockdown grew into weeks and months, and by June 22, Governor Andrew Cuomo cleared New York City—the former global epicenter—for outdoor dining. The precautions that disallowed indoor service from resuming, to the dismay of struggling restaurants, were drawn from Cuomo’s fear about the warning signs “from other states on the horizon.”

In anticipation of a sudden clamor for outdoor dining tables, restaurateurs scrambled to erect outdoor seating and barriers for the street space adjacent to their restaurants, transforming the city sidewalks into bustling woodworking stations. While the brick and mortar eateries were back in business, the decision to grant restaurants free rein over street space was yet another blow to New York City’s forgotten food population: street vendors. The temporary outdoor dining program, introduced at the New York City Council, has permitted restaurants to occupy plazas, sidewalks, streets, and parking lots—in many cases displacing vendor carts and street-food trucks that had been serving out

of these very places for years. Forced to relocate, vendors lost many of their day-to-day patrons, a slowdown that was further perpetuated by a drastic reduction in foot traffic throughout the city during the three-month lockdown. The network of vendor carts around my high school, Stuyvesant, for one, rely on a midday rush of students—a demographic of customers who have not spent a dime at these same carts since the March closure of the school building.

Vendors have been economically underserved by the government throughout the course of the pandemic: a large fraction of the city vendor population is comprised of undocumented immigrants who were not afforded stimulus checks back in April. A resilient group of 20,000 hardworking individuals who serve much of the working class in the city, vendors are rarely represented in local legislation and are often overlooked by lawmakers in Albany. This precedent of hostility toward street vendors was cemented by a 1981 law that capped the number of street vendor permits at 5,000, essentially whittling down the industry to an elite hobby, not a passage for the American Dream. The mismanaged vendor license system, which emerged out of this antiquated legislation, has forced aspiring vendors to pay up to \$18,000 for a retail \$200 permit in order to sell legally out of their carts. The strict cap on vendor permit availability, which has remained unchanged for four decades, has not kept pace with the extensive population growth of the city and has authorized over-policing of vendors. Evelia Coyotzi, a tamale vendor in Corona, Queens, was arrested more than 15 times, not for breaking well-defined laws and rules, but for selling her authentic Tlaxcalan cuisine in the wrong place at the wrong time—namely, an era during which the police and former mayor Rudy Giuliani reportedly did not want a single vendor on the streets.

A community that has long been subject to Albany's cold shoulder, street vendors now have a chance to pass legislation that would support the industry in a period of unprecedented need—Intro 1116. Council members Margaret Chin and Carlos Menchaca pioneered a bill that would “aim to bring increased opportunities, fairness, and consistent enforcement to a chaotic system created by a decades-old cap that has forced many vendors to turn to an underground market for licenses.” Intro 1116 would directly expand the availability of vending permits, implement an official vendor advisory board, and create an office for street vendor enforcement.

As a New York City student with a fixed budget, I understand that the street vendor population in our city is indispensable; my go-to orders at the halal and Korean food carts have stayed fresh on my mind even after a six-month hiatus. The vendors themselves were more than just faces I would pass as I trekked down the white-collar neighborhood of TriBeCa—I exchanged daily greetings

and smiles, and they knew my order at the mere sight of me. For all of the affordable lunches that they served to me, it is now my obligation to support the bill that might very well keep their businesses alive in these troubled times. These vendors deserve more than our thoughts and prayers—they need decisive action.

If your life has been bettered by a street vendor, or if you want to protect these resolute workers with families and dreams, I urge you to take to the following actions: call your council member and urge them to support Intro 1116; call Corey Johnson, the speaker of the New York City Council, and remind him that you care about street vendors in our city; and, finally, try to buy your next meal from a local street vendor. They have always been there for us at our every convenience—now imagine a New York City without them. ■

# Riots Through a Different Lens

## CRITICAL ESSAY

**Samantha Podnar**, Grade 11, North Allegheny Senior High School, Wexford, PA.  
Janellen Lombardi, *Educator*; Western PA Writing Project & The University of Pittsburgh  
School of Education, *Affiliate*. Gold Medal, **American Voices Medal**

*Viewing civil unrest as a symptom of systemic oppression, not a tool to combat it.*

Riots have marked America since the country's very beginning. Perhaps one most notably sewn into the fabric of American history is the Boston Massacre, in which British troops fired on a crowd of American protestors in a city fraught with tensions over British tax laws. Other notable riots in American history include the New York Draft Riots and Haymarket Square Riot, both in response to work-related grievances in the mid- to late-19th century; the Zoot Suit Riots of 1943, during which white military personnel targeted black, Filipino, and Mexican men in Los Angeles; and the famous Stonewall Riots in 1969, when police and club-goers clashed outside of a gay bar, paving the way for LGBTQ+ rights. Race-related riots have also been frequent, many occurring as a reaction to police violence. These include the Stono Rebellion, the riots of the Red Summer of 1919, the Detroit Riots in 1967, and the Los Angeles Riots in response to the acquittal of the officers who beat Rodney King.

These riots did not appear out of thin air. Widespread anger is rarely baseless—communities full of comfortably employed people with full bellies do not see the collective rage and violence that marks periods of civil unrest. But are riots effective in combating the issues from which they stem? The issue is hotly contested—there is evidence to suggest that they often economically harm the communities in which they occur, while there are also historical examples of their success, including the riots after Martin Luther King Jr.'s death that led

to the passing of groundbreaking civil rights legislation in the form of the Fair Housing Act of 1968.

This past summer has seen many riots catalyzed by the killing of George Floyd, reigniting the debate over the effectiveness of violence and looting in bringing about change. Those opposed to the Black Lives Matter movement often cite property damage and Martin Luther King Jr.'s tactics to prove that peaceful protest is the only “right” way to fight oppression, while supporters of BLM argue that the riots have led to victories within the movement, including the reopening of Elijah McClain’s case and banning of no-knock warrants in various states following the death of Breonna Taylor.

But while both of these views see riots as either effective or ineffective solutions to a problem, riots shouldn’t be seen as a potential solution at all—rather, they are the inevitable, very human reaction to state-condoned violence and oppression and should be treated as an indication to tackle underlying problems instead of as a means to do so.

Riots are not, as many believe, mindless, unfocused mob rule—they are the mobilization of many individuals who share a common enemy or cause and who take to the streets for their movement specifically. When a riot takes place, group polarization and anonymity come into play—that is, people lose their sense of self when in a crowd of like-minded people, leading them to make more extreme decisions. All that is necessary to start a riot is underlying rage and frustration and a catalyst, like a blaze beginning with just a pile of tinder and a spark. In the case of the recent surge in the BLM movement, the tinder is the anger within the black community built up over centuries of systemic racism, like a powder keg pressurized to the point of explosion.

Humiliation is a recurring theme within this anger. There is humiliation in being slammed over the hood of a car by a police officer as your white counterparts stand by, untouched. There is humiliation in being denied a job just for having an African American-sounding name, in growing up and always seeing people with your skin color relegated to the roles of villains and sidekicks. There is humiliation in being the only person with your skin color in a boardroom, in listening to a backhanded compliment from a coworker that you “speak so well for someone like you,” in feeling the burning stares of white classmates who have never seen hair like yours. There is humiliation in repeated embarrassment and rejection within white society of your personhood, and there is humiliation every time you have to convince someone that your pain exists.

Those who condemn the riots yet claim to support the BLM movement in all other aspects miss the frustration at the very heart of the black community. The riots are a symptom of widespread oppression, and denying their validity

denies the right of black Americans to be angry at their own oppression and mistreatment and to express themselves in accordance with that rage.

Attempting to label riots as effective or ineffective treats them as a political tool, but that perspective completely misses what riots are: a natural response to generations of pent-up anger and dehumanization. When someone cries out after their arm is broken, they do not believe their own cry will get them to the hospital or heal their injury—they are simply reacting, responding naturally as a human who feels pain. Pain within the black community stretches back centuries, and it runs far deeper than a broken arm, weaving itself through the nerves and sinews of society like a disease that has been allowed to ravage this country for far too long.

Many condemn one type of violence while ignoring the other—that is, systemic, state-sanctioned violence whose victims respond with their own fervent defense. Slavery is violence. The war on drugs is violence. Police brutality is violence. Redlining, segregation, mass incarceration, racial achievement gaps, and microaggressions are violence. Yes, riots are violence too, but they occur at the other end of the balance of power, an outcry among African Americans over scales that are so overwhelmingly stacked against them. Author Ta-Nehisi Coates wrote eloquently in 2015 in response to the Baltimore Riots about the government’s response to civil unrest:

When nonviolence is preached as an attempt to evade the repercussions of political brutality, it betrays itself. When nonviolence begins halfway through the war with the aggressor calling time out, it exposes itself as a ruse. When nonviolence is preached by the representatives of the state, while the state doles out heaps of violence to its citizens, it reveals itself to be a con. And none of this can mean that rioting or violence is “correct” or “wise,” any more than a forest fire can be “correct” or “wise.” Wisdom isn’t the point tonight. Disrespect is. In this case, disrespect for the hollow law and failed order that so regularly disrespects the community.

There is an attempt by many, often those who have the most to lose should widespread civil unrest overturn the existing social hierarchy, to channel the anger evident in riots into more manageable outlets. Peaceful protest is lauded as the only way to achieve equality—even though it is often met with similar discontent—because peaceful protest does much less to destabilize the status quo than does rioting. The founding fathers feared “mobocracy” as much as current politicians and CEOs fear the looting of a Target, and those in power have influenced large parts of the public into fearing their own collective power.

Riots shouldn't be measured by their "productivity," by the laws passed or cases resolved in their wake. Riots shouldn't be seen as a tool for fighting oppression, or a replacement for the widespread reorganization of society that is needed to combat systemic racism. Riots should be observed and reported on, rioters acknowledged as human beings exercising their right to feel angry over mistreatment, and underlying causes of riots sought out and addressed.

The Kerner Commission, a report identifying poverty, unemployment, voter suppression, violent policing, and other forms of institutionalized racism as major causes behind the unrest in cities across America during the summer of 1967, states, "What the rioters appeared to be seeking was fuller participation in the social order and the material benefits enjoyed by the majority of American citizens. Rather than rejecting the American system, they were anxious to obtain a place for themselves in it." All non-black Americans should be examining and working to dismantle the institutions that keep our black brothers and sisters from enjoying the opportunities we are afforded, not berating them for demanding their rightful seat at the table.

Malcolm X once said, "You can't separate peace from freedom because no one can be at peace unless he has his freedom." This has been echoed in recent chants from the BLM movement of "No justice, no peace." As long as oppression continues, riots are inevitable. Perhaps what is to be most feared is not the riots themselves, but a world in which black Americans do not riot in response to the killing of their family members on the streets, the locking up and exploitation of their brothers and fathers, and the continued weight of chains that have yet to be lifted. ■

# “Do You See the Story?”: A Crisis of Language in *Heart of Darkness*

## CRITICAL ESSAY

**Vishnu Bharathram**, Grade 12, Riverdale Country School, Bronx, NY. Kent Kildahl, *Educator*; NYC Scholastic Awards, *Affiliate*. Gold Medal

At the Berlin Conference of 1884–1885, all the major European powers (England, France, Belgium, Germany, Portugal, and Italy) convened and “decided” how they would divide up the continent of Africa among themselves; the Congo was “made” the personal property of King Leopold II of Belgium. Over the next decades, Leopold and his fellow Europeans would mercilessly extract resources and people from Africa, but—astoundingly—under the guise of a humanitarian mission: These imperialists professed a desire to “rescue” the “savages” from their ways, to bring “civilization,” and to spread Christianity to the “dark continent.” In his novel *Heart of Darkness*, Joseph Conrad, a staunch anti-imperialist, offers a critical examination of the discourses underpinning Africa’s colonial exploitation. The protagonist of the novel is Charlie Marlow, who, for most of the novel, is himself narrating the tale of his experiences in the Congo to his fellow crewmates on a boat in London and, simultaneously, to the reader. Conrad argues that Marlow soon recognizes that European discourses of “progress” simply aim to obscure the moral horrors taking place under colonial rule. However, Conrad suggests that, when Marlow tries to comprehend these horrors by capturing them in a language-based framework, he fails, and this failure leaves him morally and epistemologically paralyzed.

As he describes his arrival in the Congo, Marlow recalls that he soon learned that European colonists’ discourse of “progress” and civilization obscured the

true nature of their deeds; however, he implies that, bereft of any explanatory discourse to help him process what he was seeing, he entered—and remains in—a state of psychological and epistemological chaos. Marlow states that, when he saw Africans being forced to work on the company station, the colonists told him they were “criminals” and “enemies” to whom the “outraged law . . . had come”; he stepped into the “shade”—where, seeing a laborer who was a “dying . . . shadows of disease and starvation,” he gave him a “biscui[t]”—and, horrified stepped out of the shade and into the presence of a company accountant with “white cuffs” (18–21). By claiming that they were applying the “law” to “criminals,” Marlow implies, the colonists were suggesting that they were on some heroic mission to introduce justice and “progress” to a land of “savages.” But Marlow’s juxtaposition of the noble language of “law” with the realities he had observed—“dying,” “disease,” and “starvation”—suggests that he was able to see the disjuncture between the colonists’ elevated narratives and the rapaciousness of their actions. He further emphasizes his recognition of this disjuncture by suggesting that he identified the “shade” as the locus of true knowledge, which implies that he—in a disruption of traditional Western black-white binaries—could see that the light and “white[ness]” of the colonists and their discourses represented not enlightenment but concealment. However, the fact that Marlow instinctively stepped out of the “shade” and into the “light” suggests that he felt uncomfortable with this new knowledge and would rather have avoided its disruptive implications. After all, colonial discourses of “progress” and civilization—to which Marlow had presumably been exposed his entire life—might have provided him with the (false) comfort of a language-based framework through which to capture and understand the nature of what he was witnessing. As the narrator, Marlow reveals that—once stripped of the illusions underpinning colonial narratives—he was left to confront the radical horror and otherness of colonial Africa without any explanatory framework to guide him: When he saw the Congolese laborer “dying,” Marlow’s narration suggests, he simply had no means to process what he was seeing, and could therefore do nothing more than give him a “biscui[t].” One could argue that, even at the moment of narration, Marlow remains without any means of comprehending or explaining what he saw in the Congo. That is why he is recounting his experiences—in the hopes of establishing some framework to parse them.

Marlow, through the very act of narration, tries to forge a language-based discourse that recognizes and explains the radical horrors he has witnessed, but the layered nature of these horrors—their occupation of the moral and psychological realms as well as that of the physically observable—places them beyond the reach of language, which is, as Marlow himself indicates, funda-

mentally superficial. Marlow asserts that, when his boat was being “shot” at with “arrows,” he was surrounded by a “white fog” that put him in a “trance,” after which the helmsman was “shot” and gave an “extraordinary, profound” look before dying; at a different point, Marlow tells his audience that he feels like he is trying to “tell . . . a dream . . . [of] being captured by the incredible” (48, 56, 32). Marlow’s use of the words “dream” and “incredible” evoke the image of experiences that lie beneath—that lie beyond—the mundane realm of exterior physical activity and perception. Therefore, Marlow’s suggestion that “tell[ing]” and language are incapable of capturing such inner “dream[s]” and “incredible” experiences suggests that he recognizes that words are intrinsically superficial—they are perhaps capable of recording “exterior” humans actions but not of documenting the inner moral and psychological experiences that dwell beneath them. Yet, paradoxically, the very horrific experiences Marlow is trying to document in words affect him primarily on a moral and psychological level—as opposed to the level of mundane surface-level physical perception. For example, in the scene where Marlow describes being shot at, his retrospective use of the words “trance” and “white fog” suggests that he had entered a mode of physical perception that was not really perception at all—that he was perceiving this event primarily through the lens of his own inner psychology and inner moral state. Yet when Marlow tries to describe his response to the helmsman’s death on a psychological level, all he can do is to list hollow, meaningless adjectives—“extraordinary,” “profound”—that ultimately skirt around, and reveal nothing about, what he was undergoing or feeling. Marlow’s words are unable, it seems, to cut to the heart of the moral and psychological horrors he has experienced in the “heart of darkness.”

Marlow’s narration implies that the failure of his explanatory discourse throws him into a state of moral paralysis: Without any framework to help him assess the horrors he has seen, Marlow does little more than passively relay impressions from his own experiences—unable to decode or assess them for himself—in the vain hope that his audience (which includes the reader) might be able to penetrate those impressions for him. For example, Marlow describes the scene with the heads on the pikes largely in terms of an avalanche of sensory impressions, from the “shrunk dry lips” to the “round knobs” to the “narrow white line of the teeth”; at another point in his story, Marlow asks his crew-mates (and the reader), “Do you see the story? Do you see anything at all?” before pointing out that they, like all human beings, spend their entire lives dwelling on the “surface” of existence without considering the moral and psychological “realit[ies]” beneath (71–72, 32–33, 42). In the scene with the heads, Marlow’s exhaustively lists out his impressions but dedicates little time to analyzing them, suggesting

that—lacking an explanatory framework to help him assess such impressions—he is unable to decode them himself. Therefore, one could interpret the questions Marlow asks of his audience—“Do you see the story? Do you see anything at all?”—as representing not Marlow’s impatience with incompetent listeners, but rather a plea for help: He is asking these questions, one could argue, because he cannot “see anything at all” himself—he has no explanatory discourse to light his path—and simply hopes that someone else might be able to help him “see,” to pinpoint the deeper moral implications of his experiences for him. But this is a futile hope. As Marlow himself recognizes, *all* people (including himself)—trapped in a system of language designed to document surface-level physical events—merely occupy the “surface” of reality without ever probing what lies beneath. If it is indeed language itself that cannot penetrate the moral and psychological realms—and, in particular, moral and psychological horrors—then perhaps there is no one who can create the discourse Marlow so badly needs.

In *Heart of Darkness*, Joseph Conrad implies that the nature and structure of human language itself are well-suited to the rhetoric of colonialism. Human language, in Conrad’s conception, is a superficial mode of communication—it forecloses the possibility of expressing complex, multilayered ideas, and it therefore lends itself to discourses that simplify and that are simplistic. And as Conrad suggests, the discourses of imperialists—chauvinistic words that delineate a forceful, arbitrary binary between “savage” and “civilized”—certainly fit that definition. ■

# The Cheapest Diner Ever

## DRAMATIC SCRIPT

**Kamtoya Okeke**, Grade 9, School Without Walls High School, Washington, D.C.

Meghan Holsinger, *Educator*; Writopia Lab, *Affiliate*. Gold Medal

Anywhere, America

*Dark gas station with a brightly lit twenty-four-hour diner in the back. Leaning against the counter of this diner is a bored waitress, her faded name tag reading: WILL, the last letter faded out and unreadable. She's fair skinned and blonde, her hair slightly frizzy from a long day of waiting on customers. Her shirt has the rumpled appearance of an overworn shirt, and she's wearing tights under a short skirt.*

*Although the outside is bright, the inside of the diner has a muted glow, the only source of light from the exposed lightbulbs hanging from the ceiling above the booths. The bell on the door of the diner rings as it opens.*

*(Out of sight, a man's voice)*

Will! Get the door!

*WILLA glances backward at her boss, maybe to check on him, maybe to make sure he isn't looking as she flips him off with a snap of her gum.*

*The customer, a woman, has her hand pressed against the glass door of the diner, keeping it open as if she hasn't yet decided about walking inside.*

**RICK:** *(Loudly, to unnoticed customer)* Close the door, would ya?

*The woman quickly drops her hand, and steps in, the door closing with the sound of ringing bells. The print of her hand remains on the cold-fogged door.*

**RICK:** *(To self)* Cold as balls out there.

*WILLA turns to face the customer.*

**WILLA:** *(Drawling)* Don't just stand at the d—

*WILLA sees the woman properly for the first time, surprise coloring her voice.*

**WILLA:** *(Shocked)* Tess?

*The woman, TESS, is wearing large, dark sunglasses and an oversized, black overcoat. Most of her face is hidden by the shadows thrown by the high collar of her overcoat. The overcoat is ill-fitting, its shoulders sloping too low, and its sleeves extending past her fingers. She looks almost as shocked as WILLA.*

**TESS:** *(Sheepish and quiet)* Willa.

*TESS takes a step forward, then rethinks it with a slight shake of her head. She steps back.*

**TESS:** I . . . I should go.

*TESS cracks open the door again as WILLA watches. WILLA opens her mouth, about to speak, but stops.*

**TESS:** I'm sorry. I shouldn't have come here.

**RICK:** *(Irritated)* Will someone close the bleeding door!

**TESS:** *(Her hand is still on the door, and she wavers, uncertain)* Is that—?

**WILLA:** *(Looking away)* Yeah.

*There's a long pause; the wind whistles in through the door. WILLA shivers.*

**TESS:** *(Quietly, as if she's afraid)* Can I stay?

*WILLA, who had been on the verge of offering, nods. TESS smiles gratefully, and it is almost painful to see the relief that washes over her face.*

**WILLA:** *(Gestures to the back)* I need to talk to Rick. *(She pauses, correcting herself.)* My boss.

*TESS nods again, looking around the diner as WILLA disappears behind a swinging door. The vinyl of the booth seats are cracked, its red seats faded from long use, the paint of the browned walls peeling, and the floors are dirty and stained. TESS tugs up her collar, glancing back at the front door of the diner, regretting walking in. She steps up to a frame on the wall. Inside is a newspaper clip naming the diner “THE CHEAPEST DINER EVER” for five years in a row.*

*Cuts to WILLA, in a small kitchen in the back, standing in front of a slightly overweight, graying man sitting on a wooden stool. He has tired eyes, wrinkles lining his mouth, its corners tilted down. A bottle of cheap beer is in his hand. An empty one, knocked over, lies on the table alongside a long-forgotten sandwich.*

**WILLA:** *(Brightly, obviously forced)* Heya, boss. Just a customer. Might take awhile.

**RICK:** *(Gruffly)* Told ya to call me Rick. *(He pauses to peer inside his bottle, then looks up as something occurs to him.)* She pretty? The customer?

**WILLA:** *(Shaking her head with disgust)* Just a customer.

*WILLA pauses, but he says nothing more; she turns and leaves. The door slowly shuts behind her. TESS is still staring at the framed newspaper clip, her fingers against the bottom edge. WILLA clears her throat and TESS jumps, startled.*

**WILLA:** *(Stepping around the counter)* Do you want to sit? I can get you something. Tap water, fries . . . ?

**TESS:** No. *(She sees WILLA grit her teeth at the dismissal and reiterates.)* I just—I’ll sit.

*TESS chooses the booth closest to the front door and a window with a light covering of ice, putting her hand on the table. WILLA steps next to the booth, and they stare at each other for a moment.*

*This pause highlights their differences. WILLA is tan and rounded, her button-down and short skirt giving her gracious curves. Her blonde hair curls under her chin, barely brushing her shoulders. TESS seems constructed of hard lines and edges, with pale skin emphasized by blurred makeup and a stick-thin figure visible only in her sharp cheekbones and knee down from her black overcoat.*

**WILLA:** Do you want me to take your coat?

**TESS:** It’s fine.

*It's obvious the two don't know how to interact with each other. WILLA hovers at the edge of the booth uncertainly.*

**TESS:** I don't mind. You can sit.

*WILLA takes the seat in front of TESS. WILLA snaps her gum a few times before pulling it out and sticking it under the table.*

**TESS:** *(Making a face of disgust)* Willa—

**WILLA:** *(Sharply)* Don't.

*Beat.*

**WILLA:** *(Trying to bring in a better mood)* Why are you here?

*TESS looks away then slips off her large overcoat, her face turned away, folding it beside her. Underneath, she has on a heavily wrinkled top with a polka-dot print. She sets her dark sunglasses on the table, takes a breath, then faces WILLA.*

**WILLA:** *(Takes in a sharp breath)* Oh.

*A bruise, previously covered by the overcoat's high collar and the large sunglasses, spreads across her cheekbone. Her right eye is a deep purple and nearly swollen shut. TESS doesn't meet WILLA's eyes.*

**TESS:** *(In an attempt to change the subject)* D'you work here, still?

**WILLA:** Tess—your face.

**TESS:** You're still married?

**WILLA:** *(Insistent)* Tess.

**TESS:** Goddammit, Willa. Don't you think I've noticed? *(She draws in a slow, ragged breath.)* Are you still married?

**WILLA:** *(Hesitating, with a glance at TESS' bruise)* No. We divorced three years ago.

**TESS:** *(Finally looking at WILLA)* Three—? Oh.

**WILLA:** *(Looking up at the paneled ceiling)* Yeah.  
*(She drums her fingers on the table.)*

And you? Are you still married?

**TESS:** *(Shrugs a shoulder)* Does it matter?

**WILLA:** *(Faking nonchalance)* I don't care. *(WILLA continues drumming her fingers on the table, looking everywhere else but at TESS.)*

**TESS:** *(Abruptly)* I am.

**WILLA:** You're what?

**TESS:** Married.

**WILLA:** *(Stops drumming her fingers on the table)* Well, good for you.

*TESS nods to herself, and silence settles around them. WILLA glances up to TESS' face and the bruise, clearly wondering what happened, but unwilling to ask.*

**WILLA:** *(Carefully)* And you're happy?

**TESS:** *(Tugging at the hem of her shirt, as if it could reach her cheekbone and cover the sprawling bruise)* 'Course.

**WILLA:** *(Repeating, falsely)* Good for you.

*Every few seconds, WILLA looks at TESS' bruise, and TESS rubs her fingers against the edge of her shirt, its fraying hem nowhere close to covering the bruise that seems much worse directly underneath the lightbulb above the booth.*

**TESS:** I can put the glasses back on if it bothers you.

**WILLA:** It doesn't bother me.

*TESS puts the sunglasses back on anyway, a little relieved to be out of WILLA's scrutiny. The glasses reflect WILLA's uncomfortable face and the rows of the faded red booths behind her. It's hard to tell where she's really looking in those dark glasses.*

**TESS:** I didn't think you'd still be here.

**WILLA:** *(Frowning slightly)* What do you mean?

**TESS:** You've worked here . . . five years now?

**WILLA:** *(Glancing around the diner like she's seeing it from a stranger's point of view)* Seven.

**TESS:** *(Looks at WILLA)* Long time.

**WILLA:** *(Drawing herself together angrily)* Look, if you're here to patronize me, then you can leave.

**TESS:** No. *(She fiddles with the side of her glasses.)* No, of course not.

**WILLA:** Why are you here? *(Clarifying.)* What happened to your face?

**TESS:** When did I see you last?

**WILLA:** I don't know.

**TESS:** *(Laughs ruefully)* I don't know either.

*TESS says nothing more, and WILLA grows frustrated.*

**WILLA:** *(Bluntly)* You can't show up out of the blue with a bruise on your face.

**TESS:** I can leave.

**WILLA:** That's not what I'm saying.

**TESS:** *(Takes a breath)* I don't know what to tell you.

**WILLA:** *(Quietly)* The truth?

*WILLA stares at TESS for a long moment, then the two women turn to the window as they see a flash of bright headlights. A dark SUV turns into the parking lot, only to reverse and leave back the way it came.*

**WILLA:** *(For the third time, quietly)* Why are you here?

*TESS seems to shrink into her rumpled shirt. Neither have looked away from the empty lot of the gas station outside of the window.*

**WILLA:** *(Stating in a matter-of-fact manner)* You haven't changed your clothes in an age, they're wrinkled and dirty. Your hair is a mess; you have a bruise across your face. There's no car out there, so evidently, you walked.

*Beat.*

**WILLA:** *(Not unkindly, finally looking to TESS)* Why are you here?

**TESS:** *(Drops shoulders, defeated, answering honestly)* I don't know.

*(She touches her bruised face lightly.)* I wish things could have been different.

**WILLA:** *(Realistically)* Not gonna make it any different.

**TESS:** *(Somewhat naively)* I know it won't. I just . . . I just wish it were different sometimes, y'know?

*WILLA nods knowingly and the women stay quiet for a moment. TESS opens her mouth to say something, but she is interrupted by the sound of the swinging door as RICK walks in.*

**RICK:** *(Scratching chin)* Is she gone—oh. *(He eyes TESS, then WILLA, before turning back to TESS.)* This isn't a seating area, you've got to buy something.

**WILLA:** Boss—

**TESS:** *(Interrupting)* It's fine. I can get a cup of tea.

**RICK:** Five dollars.

*TESS looks at the laminated menu in front of her, which clearly states at the top: TEA = \$1. She pushes it aside, looking back up to RICK and nods.*

**RICK:** *(Snaps his fingers at WILLA)* Tea.

*WILLA stands up and walks to the back. There's the sound of a tap running. TESS has the bruised side of her face tilted away from RICK. He leans down behind the counter, rummaging for something. After a few moments, he emerges triumphantly from a cupboard with another beer, and goes back inside the kitchen, leaving TESS alone. She pulls on her overcoat again, looking outside as she waits for WILLA.*

*WILLA appears again after a couple minutes and pauses when she sees TESS.*

**WILLA:** *(Hesitantly)* Are you leaving?

**TESS:** No, not yet.

**WILLA:** But you're going to.

**TESS:** I have to.

*WILLA places the cups and saucers on the wood laminate table. TESS pulls the closest cup to her and takes a sip. She forks out a ten-dollar bill from her pocket and sets it in front of WILLA.*

**WILLA:** *(Pushing back the bill)* He only said five dollars. *(She points at the menu.)* And it's really only one, anyway.

**TESS:** *(Sliding it back to WILLA gently)* I know. Keep the change.

**WILLA:** *(Going from pleasant to snarling)* I'm not a charity case, Tess. I don't want your money.

**TESS:** *(Throwing up her hands in frustration)* Then give it to Rick. Or give me the change. Or burn it, for all I care. *(She puts two fingers to the left side of her temple and leans on it as she takes a breath.)*

**WILLA:** You know I work here, you were expecting to see me. So why—why are you acting like you're better than me? You came to me for help. If you want to act like that bruise isn't on your face and you came here for no reason, then just leave, Tess. Just leave.

**TESS:** *(Desperation creeps into her voice as she tries to reach WILLA)*  
I just—no—it’s—

*TESS shakes her head and grabs the overcoat folded neatly beside her. She shoves her hand into its pockets and yanks out a handful of crumpled bills.*

**TESS:** Here. *(Drops the wad on the table.)* This is why I’m here.

*A single bill floats away from the pile as TESS throws more bills on the table. WILLA’s eyes follow the single bill, a one-hundred-dollar bill, slide against the beaded water on the side of her glass. WILLA looks back to TESS, who isn’t done yet, moving to the other pocket. WILLA watches the growing pile, trembling, her fist held to her mouth in shock.*

**WILLA:** *(Her voice shaking as much as the rest of her)* Oh god. God, that’s—  
*(She darts a glance at the messy pile on the table and exhales.)* Put that away before Rick comes out.

*TESS stares at her blankly.*

**WILLA:** Put it away. *(TESS doesn’t move, an unnervingly dead look in her eyes.)* Please.

**TESS:** *(Blinking)* Sorry.

*TESS shoves the already crumpled bills back in her pocket, and WILLA peels the now wet hundred-dollar bill from her glass. TESS takes it from her and puts it with the rest.*

**WILLA:** *(Distressed)* How much is it?

**TESS:** *(Emotionless)* Ten thousand.

*WILLA exhales loudly, her palms on the table. She brings her eyes up to TESS’, trying to figure out what’s going on in her mind.*

**TESS:** *(Slowly)* Do you remember Tom?

**WILLA:** *(Warily)* Yeah . . .

**TESS:** He was the one who . . . *(She trails off, fluttering her fingers around the right side of her face.)* It wasn’t the first time, but it was the last straw, y’know?

**WILLA:** *(Interrupts, alarmed)* You killed him?

**TESS:** *(Laughing wildly)* No. I wish I did. *(She smiles.)* I should have. *(She pauses, collecting herself.)* I took his money. Walked out at midnight yesterday.

*WILLA watches TESS speak, almost as if she knew what TESS was going to say, but wanted to make sure.*

**TESS:** *(Sadly)* He didn't love me. I was his prize.

**WILLA:** We're always the prize.

*The two of them become silent, TESS mournful and WILLA contemplative.*

**WILLA:** *(Abruptly)* You could have tried. To reach out, at least once.

**TESS:** I had to take care of you. I didn't have time to also be . . . your sister. *(She pauses, looking at WILLA.)*

**WILLA:** and TESS *(Together)* I thought you were happy.

**TESS:** *(Laughs)* Who even knows what that means anymore.

*WILLA smiles ruefully, and TESS sips at her cup of tea.*

**TESS:** *(Hesitating)* I'm going back.

**WILLA:** *(Glancing at TESS)* To . . . Tom?

**TESS:** *(Shrugs)* I have nowhere else to go. *(Pauses.)* You?

**WILLA:** *(Picks up the menus and flips through them loudly)* Am I staying?

**TESS:** Yes.

**WILLA:** Probably. *(She sighs.)* I have nowhere else to go.

*They stare at each other, and the silence is laden with guilt, fear, and unspoken wishes. WILLA continues to flip through the menus, and TESS watches her.*

**TESS:** *(Abruptly)* How old are we now? I'm—oh, God—I'm forty-six and you're . . . thirty-seven.

**WILLA:** Who would've thought we'd end up here?

**TESS:** What? Talking to each other?

**WILLA:** *(Shakes her head)* I mean, in this diner.

**TESS:** Oh, that.

*Simultaneously, the sisters turn to the framed newspaper clip. ■*

# Reluctant Reading: A Problem with a Solution

## JOURNALISM

**Joyce Lee**, Grade 8, The King's Academy, Sunnyvale, CA. Katie Bittick, *Educator*; Writopia Lab, *Affiliate*. Silver Medal

### *i. The Problem*

In one bedroom study, the minutes tick by as a student scans a page carefully. The book he is reading is difficult to read, full of complex concepts and intricate details. He sets the book down and sighs, glancing at the computer beside him. His fingers itch as he reaches for the laptop and opens it slowly, the screen brightening as a new browser pops up. His hands are heavy with guilt as he types, searching for an explanation of his book.

Results flood in immediately, ranging from different websites such as “SparkNotes” and “LitCharts.” He clicks on the first website—a detailed analysis of the chapter he was supposed to read—and copies down the annotations in his book, his hands shaking. His stomach churns with shame, but he continues to read the article.

As he lies in bed that night, he feels guilt tugging at his conscience, knowing that he has broken a rule. Fear and pride go to war in his mind—he is both fearful of punishment, and too prideful to ask his teacher for help. Guilt flutters around in his mind, tainting every thought. Eventually, he tucks away his thoughts in a faraway corner in his mind and falls into a troubled sleep.

The next time he has a reading assignment, he succumbs to the temptation much faster, only lasting about 10 minutes before he searches for summaries.

After that, there is no struggle at all.

In a classroom far away, a girl sighs and slams a book on her desk disgustedly. The words swim around on the page, creating a mass of jumbled words that she couldn't unscramble—nor does she have the will to. She glares at the book, wishing that it would disappear. She hates reading. It is her least favorite activity of all time.

At break, she complains to her friends about the reading. She loathes it. It is too boring. It is useless. Reading is pointless, she tells them. The only thing it causes is boredom.

Her friends agree with her as she rants about the book. The language is too complex. It is too hard to understand. Her teachers force her to analyze every single word, they force her to draw out concepts that will not help her later on in life. It takes all of her willpower, and then some, to endure it.

Why is reading necessary? she wonders. As far as she can tell, it is nowhere near beneficial. Analyzing book texts will not help her find a job. School should focus on helping students to learn real-life skills, she claims. Reading books has no benefit, she tells her friends. It does nothing for her.

From then on, she has no patience for reading. With every page, she is tempted to tear it into pieces and burn it in the fire. With every word, a deep hatred stirs inside her, setting her resentment of reading into stone.

## *ii. Where Do Reluctant Readers Come From?*

In TeachThought's article about why students don't read, their primary reason is that "they haven't found the right book or type of book." Not all books are interesting to everyone. What a science teacher may find fascinating may be indescribably boring to an art student. Meanwhile, the art student's interests may differ from a basketball lover. Books are the same way—everyone has to find their own. There are many book genres, and many books within those genres.

Reading can be avoided among people, especially students, when they encounter a book they dislike or find boring. Teachers and adults claim certain books, such as *To Kill a Mockingbird* and *Romeo and Juliet*, are beneficial and important for children, though plenty of students may not agree, bored by the monotonous details and antiquated language. Experiences like these too often hinder the enthusiasm that students may have once had when it came to reading, eventually leading to distaste for it.

However, what many do not realize is that reading has numerous proven benefits, ranging from strengthening the brain to improving mental health. A study revealed that after reading 30 pages of a book, there was a heightened connectivity in the left temporal cortex, the part of the brain that is associated

with language and intelligence. This proved that the brain is like a muscle, and by exercising the muscle, people can improve their brain power.

When students use websites such as SparkNotes or LitCharts that analyze texts for them, their brains are not being “exercised,” which means their brain power is not improving at the rate it could be if they simply read the pages they were assigned. Though reading can be a struggle for many people, Anne E. Cunningham’s paper *What Reading Does for the Mind* reveals that reading, in general, makes a person smarter, and that it can improve analytical thinking. Actually reading a book is proven to be more beneficial to a person than searching up summaries and allowing the websites to think for them. However, sometimes the struggles of reading cause students to overlook these advantages.

While dull and tedious books can certainly be a factor in reluctant reading, difficulties in the action of reading itself is another part to consider. It is estimated that 1 in 10 Americans have dyslexia, and that 20 percent of school-aged children are dyslexic. A surprising number of people in the U.S. cannot read—approximately 32 million adults—and 50 percent of adults cannot read a book written at eighth-grade level. As an article from Spreeder elucidates, “When people read at a very slow pace, this troubles and frustrates them. It makes them feel incompetent. For these people, reading just looks too time consuming and counterproductive to even bother with.”

### *iii. How Can Reluctant Reading Be Repaired?*

A study on the effect of growth mindset explains how “learning to become a fluent reader is a rigorous task, [so] students with a growth mindset would take on the challenging task more willingly.” A growth mindset is a mindset that allows a person to “[thrive] on challenge and [see] failure not as evidence of unintelligence but as a heartening springboard for growth and for stretching [their] existing abilities,” contrary to a fixed mindset, which “assumes that . . . character, intelligence, and creative ability are [unchangeable] static givens . . . and success is the affirmation of that inherent intelligence.”

As the study elaborates, the reading curriculum today focuses mainly on the components of literacy and how to get students on grade level. However, the article reveals, “While focusing on these components of literacy is important, in order for instruction to be effective, some mindset changes need to occur. Recent research . . . has shown evidence that students who received constructive, effort-related feedback, showed increased abilities and reading and other subject areas. [This kind of feedback encourages] students to continue to persist with difficult tasks.” When reluctant readers are encouraged to have a growth mindset, the result can be immense. Students are able to approach their dif-

faculty in reading as an opportunity to improve their skills rather than filing their experiences as failure.

Motivation is key in life to achieve success. As Olympian Natalie Cook says on her website, “Without motivation, you can’t achieve anything. There are no goal posts to aim for and no purpose to strive towards.” With a growth mindset, students can be more motivated to reach their reading goals and take the path to an appreciation of reading, even if the road is long and difficult. A growth mindset allows a student to have a positive attitude towards their journey and to continue without fear of failure.

However, while there is a way for students to enjoy reading, adults play an important part in getting their children and students motivated to read. By praising a child’s efforts and how they approached the challenge of reading instead of praising their talents, adults can assist in helping them build a growth mindset. Encouragement from parents and children can help children find the motivation to overcome their barriers and begin their literary paths.

#### *iv. The Solution: How to Choose a Great Book*

Everyone is different when it comes to books, but finding a great book is well worth the effort. Some may prefer realistic books that they can relate to. Others enjoy descriptive books that they can be immersed in as they travel to a fantasy world. Still others like humorous books that can make them laugh as they read them. It all comes down to the person who reads them.

Reader Response Theory is a critical theory that emphasizes the significance of the reader when it comes to literature. It addresses the idea that even if an author hides a message in the text, it is the reader who is interpreting it. Readers do not absorb the meaning presented to them, they interpret the text as they read it. This, of course, can affect what books certain people prefer more than others, as it depends on how they interpret it.

There are a few simple steps to take to find your next enjoyable book:

1. First of all, think of what you surround yourself with daily. If you watch a lot of television, then think about what kind of show you enjoy the most. Dive down deeper: Do you enjoy shows with humor? Dramatic shows? Realistic? Do you like slow-moving shows with lots of details or stories that are quick-paced? By thinking of what you enjoy visually, you can narrow down your preferences.
2. Once you have narrowed your choices down to one or two genres, ask your friends, a librarian, or even the internet for recommendations. It is important, though, to make sure that the book fits within your preferences, especially if you are a person who does not read often. Your goal

should be to find a book that you think you will enjoy. A useful online resource is Goodreads.

3. Read the book! If you do not enjoy it, don't give up! There are approximately 135 million books in the world, and you have only read one. There are still many more options available.

Reading regularly takes time and effort, but in the end, it is an extremely beneficial and interesting hobby. Though many may have been discouraged by a book they dislike, there are copious amounts of books all over the world that they will enjoy, if they take the next step to read them. Without reading, a person lives a life oblivious to the wonders that belong to the world of creativity that books bring them to. But to obtain the ability to travel into the worlds hidden in an author's imagination, one only has to take a book, open it, and begin to read the words. ■

# Why NYC Kids Are Fighting to Bring Back the City's Summer Jobs Program

## JOURNALISM

**Rainier Harris**, Grade 12, Regis High School, New York, NY. Allison Tyndall, *Educator*; NYC Scholastic Awards, *Affiliate*. Silver Medal

Last summer, Chamia Elzey spent her days working with kids at P.S. X114 Luis Llorens Torres School in the Bronx, doing everything from mentoring to helping with arts and crafts projects. During the break before her junior year at Bronx Collaborative High School on the Dewitt Clinton campus, Elzey not only had six weeks of well-paying work, but she was able to spend time with her cousin, who worked at P.S. X114 as well.

The job, which Elzey got through New York City's Summer Youth Employment Program (SYEP), did more than keep her busy. The \$350 she was paid every Friday helped to ease her mom's financial burden, allowing Elzey to pay her own phone bill for a few weeks, provide school supplies, food, sneakers, and haircuts for her little brother, and get a taste of financial independence and responsibility. Last year, after her 16th birthday, Elzey was afflicted with juvenile idiopathic arthritis and Sjögren's syndrome, an autoimmune disease, and she credits SYEP with helping her avoid falling into a depression.

"Everybody was looking forward to this year," Elzey says. Now that she is 17, Elzey was expecting to get more money, more responsibilities, and more opportunities in SYEP this year. "I felt like it was going to be different," she reflects. And, so far, it has been different—just not in the way Elzey wanted. On April 7, the highly anticipated SYEP program was abruptly canceled. In an email to SYEP providers, Department of Youth & Community Development commis-

sioner Bill Chong wrote, “Unfortunately, the uncertainty over how COVID-19 will continue to affect social distancing guidelines, worksite availability, and provider and site staffing as we head into late spring and summer makes it difficult to ensure that SYEP can be operated safely and efficiently.”

With the school year drawing to a close—and “defund the police” has become a rallying cry in the protests following the murder of George Floyd—demands to reinstate SYEP have been intensifying. With the city budget deadline of July 1 looming, the City Council is considering reducing the NYPD’s funding and reallocating money to youth and social services like SYEP. Although SYEP makes up a tiny part of the city’s budget, its impact on Black and brown youth citywide is huge, and the money and experience gained from the program can be both a big help to parents and offers valuable, lifelong work experience for participants.

SYEP, which provides minimum-wage work and internships to people ages 14 through 24 over a six-week summer period, has run every year since its founding in 1963. Demand for the jobs is high: Last year, around 151,000 young people applied for just 75,000 positions. As New York is projected to lose close to 500,000 jobs and billions of dollars in tax revenue as a result of the coronavirus, many are upset that a program like SYEP, which costs around \$134 million annually and accounts for 0.114 percent of the city’s budget, was cut fully while the NYPD budget remained virtually intact. Canceling SYEP also disproportionately affects people of color: 81 percent of participants in SYEP in 2019 were Black, Hispanic, or Asian, and 84 percent of participants were enrolled in Queens, Brooklyn, or the Bronx. SYEP has employed foster-care youth, public-housing residents, and formerly incarcerated juveniles.

The decision to cancel SYEP drew criticism from former Speaker of the New York City Council Christine Quinn, who called it an “outrage . . . cruel and shortsighted” in an interview with NBC. Quinn is currently the president and CEO of Win, an organization that is the largest provider of family shelter and supportive housing in NYC. “Nearly 200 young people living in Win shelters were expecting job offers this summer,” she told NBC. “What will they do now?”

Summer job programs like SYEP allow kids like Elzey to pay rent, utilities, food, and other necessities and help to ensure that housing-insecure families don’t get evicted. As the blanket moratorium on evictions in NYC ended on June 20, the threat of losing housing is once again present. With fewer tenant protections in place, programs like SYEP are even more important to help guarantee that lower-income families are financially stable.

“We’re committed to seeing a shift of funding to youth services, to social services, that will happen literally in the course of the next three weeks,” Mayor Bill de Blasio said in a press conference on June 8. Corey Johnson, the Speaker

of the New York City Council, said in his testimony at a hearing of the Council Committee on Public Safety that, while passing reform bills is progress, the city can begin “overdue” transformative change “by delivering budget justice and making significant cuts to the NYPD budget and reinvesting that money in communities.”

But organizations like Teens Take Charge (TTC), which has been leading the fight to save SYEP, say that it’s not enough. “Now is the time for action, not just words,” read a TTC email to supporters earlier this week. TTC noted that, since Johnson is running for mayor next year, it is the responsibility of NYC youth, “as current and future voters,” “to hold him accountable by sending a clear message that if he drops the ball now, we will remember it next year.”

Youth-led organizations around the city share similar sentiments. “They defunded everything else that we care about,” says Mustafa Sullivan, executive director of FIERCE, an active member organization within Communities United for Police Reform led by LGBT youth of color, which has a mission to end police harassment and violence and create safer spaces for youth. “This should not be confusing,” he adds. Sullivan, like many activists, supports reallocating \$1 billion of the NYPD’s \$6 billion budget—around 16 percent—to youth and social services, including summer job programs like SYEP and long-term housing.

Sullivan thinks more money should be invested into transitional-housing solutions that are more sustainable and longer lasting than shelters. He explains that people often get “stuck with a voucher for housing,” which is given to them by a social worker, but no one helps them find an apartment for which to apply the voucher. Transitional housing, he says, is about “creating spaces and changing the way shelters are currently, so that people can actually get into a place of economic stability.” Instead of focusing on temporary solutions, transitional housing streamlines people into permanent and affordable living situations.

“If they can afford to have helicopters hover over protesters, then they probably can figure out how to take money out of the NYPD,” says Sullivan. That would mean Elzey and thousands of other kids could get SYEP and their summers back. ■

# Can Floating Islands Combat Climate Change? A Conversation with Seaphia Founder & CEO Dr. Nathalie Mezza-Garcia

## JOURNALISM

**Michael Ding**, Grade 12, Trinity School, New York, NY. Peter Donhauser, *Educator*; NYC Scholastic Awards, *Affiliate*. Silver Medal

*Dr. Nathalie Mezza-Garcia is the CEO of Seaphia, a consultancy and business development company for floating and maritime Special Economic Zones, or SeaZones. She completed her PhD in interdisciplinary studies from the University of Warwick in 2020, researching complex governance in SeaZones and the Floating Island Project in French Polynesia.*

Dr. Nathalie Mezza-Garcia has been interested in complex political systems since she was a young teenager. Growing up in Barranquilla, Colombia, her biggest fascination was painting. “When I think of my upbringing, I think colors,” she said. As she studied visual arts at university, she realized that natural shapes and forms fit together in ways that were very different from the organizational structures of political systems.

When Dr. Mezza-Garcia then changed to a political science and governance degree at Universidad del Rosario, she became frustrated with representative democracies that she was analyzing. “The way our governments are run, we are faced with bottleneck decision-making,” she said. “I realized that if we wanted to improve our government systems, one method would be to change our relationship with the territory.” Years later, Dr. Mezza-Garcia began to focus her

governance research on seasteading, or the creation of permanent, autonomous communities on the water.

In 2016, the U.S.-based Seasteading Institute signed an agreement with French Polynesia to construct a floating-islands project near the island of Tahiti. As Dr. Mezza-Garcia had just begun her PhD candidacy, the project was an excellent opportunity for hands-on research and experience. After being accepted to present her research on SeaZones at a conference about the project, Dr. Mezza-Garcia served as a communications volunteer for eight months. She was then hired as the project's international spokesperson. While she gained experience and expanded her network to other professionals in the SeaZones industry, the project collapsed in 2018 due to backlash from local residents, who did not believe that it would benefit them directly, according to Dr. Mezza-Garcia. "It was clear to me how, for these projects to succeed, they have to directly involve and benefit the local community even if investment is international."

After submitting her PhD thesis, Dr. Mezza-Garcia decided to start Seaphia. "I believe that building something can have more impact than academic programs," she said. "I created Seaphia to cater to both the international and local markets, and to bring maritime SeaZones to Latin America." Her company seeks to involve and appeal to local communities in order to create a sustainable economy for the SeaZones. "Instead of foreign agents starting these territories in foreign places for foreigners, local and foreign companies should build zones for local and international people," she said. "It is better if the developers know the native culture and what would be an appealing environment for them." For instance, Dr. Mezza-Garcia suggested that future SeaZones should offer labs to facilitate scientific maritime research.

According to Dr. Mezza-Garcia, Seaphia's floating island projects are a significantly better alternative to projects like the Dubai islands, which have used tons of sand and concrete to construct beautiful but unsustainable islands. These permanent and immovable projects would almost certainly damage the surrounding environment, Dr. Mezza-Garcia said. "Our floating system is movable, and thus more sustainable. If we see that the islands are negatively affecting the environment, we can move the land much more easily with simple technology like tug boats."

In fact, the artificial floating islands could be a creative solution to the current climate crisis. As sea levels rise across the world, "the business appeal of these floating islands becomes more evident," Dr. Mezza-Garcia said. She noted that in Kiribati, a country in Oceania made up of islands with little elevation, the government has already tried to invest in floating-island projects. The marine technology essential to the construction and economy of floating

special economic zones provides an opportunity to “start working on a future that is more in harmony with nature,” Dr. Mezza-Garcia said. “Events such as the coronavirus pandemic are clear evidence that our systems like food and supply chains are not sustainable. Climate change will not have a vaccine to stop it, so the pandemic has shown how important it is to design, implement, and build urban systems that are environmentally friendly and sustainable.” She added, “Green, marine technologies like floating special economic zones are part of the right path forward, and they provide the regulatory framework to push for more of this technology to be developed. My ultimate goal with Seaphia and my other pursuits is to turn Barranquilla and this world into a blue, clean technology hub.” ■

# The Tragedy of Gamma XA-113

## NOVEL WRITING

**Emily Lo**, Grade 11, Union High School, Camas, WA. Sandra Johnsen, *Educator*;  
Region-at-Large, *Affiliate*. Gold Medal

*Sickbay, ISF Venture B, in orbit around Gamma XA-113, 20891012.0500*

Aidan banged on the glass of the containment chamber as hard as she could.

She had no chance of breaking through it. The walls were several centimeters of aluminum silicate glass, the same material that composed the ship's windows.

It just . . . got out some frustration.

"What's going on? Peter?"

The whining of the drills cutting into *Venture B's* lock shuddered through the deck, like the humming of a thousand bees' nests under her feet. Her head throbbed, but it probably had nothing to do with the drilling. She hitched her shoulders, testing her joints. Nauseating pain branched from her shoulder, the skin aflame.

That wasn't normal.

Peter set his lips in a grim line as he slammed his laptop shut. His mask hung loosely around his neck. He stole a quick glance at her and looked away.

Was he trying to aggravate her? He definitely knew something. But he wasn't telling her on purpose.

She didn't want to admit it to herself, but her anger stemmed from her fear. Maybe it was really as bad as she thought it was. Or worse.

"Peter, I'm tired of this. I'm starting to feel a little—"

"I told you, I'm not authorized to say anything."

"You keep saying that. You can't, you're not authorized. Stuff like that."

Her voice rose, and she winced at how sharp it sounded. No, how panicked it seemed. “Why don’t I talk to whoever gave you such a dumb order?”

“Aidan.” Peter came up to the glass, his hazmat suit crinkling loudly around him. “They don’t want to cause a panic.”

*They*, whoever that meant. And *cause a panic*? Not reassuring.

Aidan gripped the exam table paper until it ripped beneath her fingernails. “So you’re saying that what’s happened to me is enough to cause a panic.”

By the way wrinkles stood out on Peter’s face in pained furrows, Aidan knew she had guessed correctly.

“Please don’t make me talk about this, okay?” He bit his lip. “I swear, all the politics on this ship is killing me. When I joined I thought I was going to help people, not . . .” he trailed off.

The space between his words shortened like her heartbeats.

“Not what?”

Her stomach felt acidic, bitter and burning. She braced herself on the mattress. Every nerve in her body flared. The faint currents of circulated air in the containment chamber raised itchy prickles on her skin, aggravating her as though she were plunging through blackberry brambles. An unrelenting pressure packed itself into her skull like it threatened to explode any minute. She exhaled slowly, trying to even out her breathing. About as effective as venting a volcano.

“Hold on.” Peter tapped his in-ear comm, craning his head, listening for something. He glanced at Aidan, brow furrowed. He nodded to an invisible speaker. “Yes, sir.”

*Sir.*

So, he was getting orders from Captain Pascal, now. It didn’t shock her, after that whole announcement Pascal had made over the PA system. They were all keeping secrets from her. Captain Pascal and Eva were her superior officers, anyway. But this was different. They were keeping secrets from her, *about her*. They couldn’t pretend like nothing was wrong. There was something very wrong, and she wanted to know it.

And she hated the containment chamber. She couldn’t stand it—not knowing anything, not doing anything—any more.

Peter dropped his hand from his ear and strode to the far side of the room. He yanked open one of the emergency lockers and pulled out a surface suit.

He tapped on the glass. “Put this on. We’re moving you,” he said.

*Wrong, indeed*, everything whispered inside her.

Peter pressed his palm to the authorization panel beside the door. There

was a soft beeping noise as the first light of two above the door turned red. The *chunk* of locks disengaging echoed dully in the chamber.

She watched Pascal open the first door into the vestibule and drop the surface suit through. His jaw stiffened and his eyes averted from hers. What happened between now and last week, when they had been joking and playing cards in the officer's quarters? Last month, listening patiently as she told him how much she missed friends back on Earth? Or even the friendly, if not exasperated, smile he always gave when she stumbled into sickbay with the latest cut or sprain.

It unsettled her that he couldn't look her in the eye. And whenever he did, guilt lurked in his gaze.

He would never tell her anything he wasn't authorized to. He was too good to disobey a direct order.

She would have to find out through alternative methods.

*I'm not waiting around for him to donate secrets. Gotta get them myself.*

Aidan took a few deep breaths. She rolled her neck from side to side.

Although Peter was about her height, he had strength and weight to his advantage. The hazmat suit he wore would slow him down and make his movements clumsy, though. She wasn't sure if it would give her that much of an upper hand. The element of surprise, though, would certainly help.

She only had to wait.

Finally, he turned his back to retrieve an instrument.

*Now.*

She ripped off the tape securing the IV to her arm and pulled out the needle.

Then the real trick.

She pulled off her sock, wadded it up, and shoved it under her left armpit. She let her limbs go limp and closed her eyes, staying deathly still.

Within seconds, she had momentarily stopped the blood flow to the finger with the pulse oximeter, fooling it into thinking she had no heartbeat.

*Beeeeeeep.*

A sustained tone blared from the vital sign monitor.

Flatline. Any doctor's nightmare.

She inwardly smiled.

Through cracked eyelids, she watched Peter go into panic mode. He scrambled around a metal exam table. His hazmat suit flapped loosely around him as he practically tore a defibrillator case off the side cabinet it was velcroed to.

He rushed through the vestibule, locks clicking in quick succession. He wrestled open the defibrillator case, a robot voice spilling too-loud commands.

The recorded lines programmed into the case were supposed to help guide non-medical personnel when tending to a cardiac arrest victim.

At the moment, Aidan's headache blazed, turning the precise, automated directions into gibberish raging around her.

Peter reached her side, steady hands outstretched.

"Aidan, are you okay? Can you hear me?"

His eyes were wide beneath his visor, eyelashes flecked with sweat. He reached for the side of her neck. Aidan knew the procedure. He'd search for her carotid artery, try to identify a pulse.

She grabbed him by the neck before he could get an accurate read.

The veins in his temples popped out, raised in relief. His face turned red as he struggled under her grasp. He spilled AED pads and wires as his hands went instinctively to his neck. The defibrillator crashed to the floor, the robotic guide calling out error messages.

She let go and sprinted through the vestibule. She counted on the fact that her chokehold had momentarily stunned Peter, forcing him to stop and catch his breath. Adhesive ripped off her skin, sending a chorus of machines beeping. Her skin stung, cutting through her foggy migraine. Every muscle in her body drew taut. Adrenaline flowed through her veins as her body thought for her.

She barely made it past the containment doors when Peter stumbled to his feet. No doubt he'd try to force his wayward patient back into the chamber. She caught him around the waist and slammed him into the examination table behind him. An instrument tray clattered to the floor and tools scattered everywhere. She pinned him against the table with her whole body and drew her fist back. In that split second, Aidan saw realization dawning in his eyes—she was fighting him for real. And she meant it.

She aimed for his head, but he squirmed out of her reach and her punch connected with air. Peter's suit snagged on the table. The cloth tore with a shrieking noise. He scrambled toward the wall to her left.

Her eyes tracked his line of sight.

*The alarm.*

Lunging after him, her arms caught the back of his baggy suit, but he did a half-twist. Aidan used the time to catch up to him. She socked him in the jaw. Her knuckles took all the force with a sickening crack. He swayed.

She caught a fist aimed for her face with her hands, pulling him towards her. Her fingers slipped on the plastic suit, but she dug in with her fingernails to compensate. She braced her feet against the floor and shoved him off balance.

Peter's boot caught her under the ribs. Her world flashed red with pain like an electric shock. It cleared her head.

“Aidan, you know this is a bad idea,” Peter said between gasps for air. “Stand down. Please.”

As she lay on the floor, every ache in her body rose to the surface of her skin like a bruise. Her limbs felt like they were made of iron, as she suddenly felt the weight of her body. A throbbing twinge twisted in her gut.

She looked up at Peter in a blurry haze. His hand blurred, outstretched. He wielded a scalpel.

She knew him well enough that he would never hurt her. He was incapable of it. That would cripple him in this fight, and on top of that, Aidan had *intense* motivation on her side.

She got to her feet, stumbling a bit. Her vision tilted, everything spinning, like that one time she and Eva had gone to the county fair as kids and rode the tilt-a-whirl.

Except that time hadn’t ended with an unconscious man.

She caught Peter’s forearm and ducked under it. She rammed him against the wall. Her fingers worked under his and pried them apart until the scalpel clattered to the floor. Even if he wouldn’t purposely hurt her, he could accidentally stab her. That would put a wrench in her day.

As she pinned his arms to the wall, her gaze strayed to the ground near her feet. Various instruments lay there in disarray. One of them looked out of place.

A tranquilizer pen.

ISF had stocked the *Venture* with a small supply of fast-acting tranquilizer pens, military-issue, only for emergencies. They were always locked up in the sickbay cabinets. They were never lying around.

*Unless . . . Peter planned to use it. Soon.*

“What’s the tranq for?” she screamed, “tell me, is it meant for me?”

*What is going on? Why won’t anyone tell me? Are they afraid?*

She snatched up the pen and held it to his neck.

“Aidan, I’m begging you, rethink this.” Real fear shone in his eyes, and she could feel his chest heaving arms. “This is gonna go on your record forever. And you don’t want that, because when the captain gives orders, you should—”

Gritting her teeth, she pressed the tip of the pen firmly under his jaw.

“Don’t tell me about orders,” she growled, “I’m really over all that.”

She depressed the plunger.

Right through the suit.

Aidan watched him struggle in silence, his mouth moving but making no sound. The movements of his limbs slackened in her grasp, and he slumped, eyes wide open, to the floor. She hooked her arms under his armpits and dragged him into the containment chamber. The tranq would take five minutes to fully

knock him out, and even if he woke up after its half-hour of effectiveness, he'd have to deal with both locks on the containment chamber doors.

It was long enough.

Long enough to get the truth.

*Clang.*

She heard voices and foreign footsteps. Pascal had broken through, then. She had to make her work quick. She grabbed Peter's laptop.

With one hand, she pried open Peter's right eyelid, and with the other, she wrestled open the laptop with some help from her boot to hold it in place. Before long, the laptop gave a small chime as it finished the retinal scan.

She swiveled the laptop towards her. The darn thing requested a fingerprint scan, and on top of that, a written password. Wasn't a retinal scan enough? Passwords—so time-consuming, but not that complicated for her, at least in this situation.

Eva and Peter had begun sharing passwords recently, now that they were engaged. A smile came over Aidan's face. That just made things easier. Eva was the kind of person who used one password and variations of it for everything, back in the good old days when biometrics hadn't gained much traction.

She tried the first few guesses that came to her mind, using Peter's limp fingers to type the characters in. The last one worked.

*Ha. Thought you got me, huh?*

She moved out of the containment room, careful to lock the doors as she did so, and sat at the edge of the exam table.

Peter's laptop had several tabs open. One of them happened to be a messaging app.

She scrolled through the list of recently sent messages. A rather long message thread unraveled between him and Eva.

She clicked on it.

A lengthy wall of text filled the screen.

*PETER: when the storm clears we'll send a shuttle for her EVA: if she's still alive. EVA: she has to be alive PETER: i'll be standing by . . .*

The timestamp showed that this conversation happened yesterday when she must have been lying unconscious in the tunnel. A worried tone threaded through Eva's texts.

*Really? So sweet, Eva.*

She scrolled down a bit farther.

Then something caught her eye.

*PETER: here's a draft of the medical report*

[FILE AidanMeng20891011d1100.pdf]

EVA: did you send it to command yet?

PETER: no

EVA: delete it

EVA: and delete this chat

Aidan felt her breath snag in her throat as she tapped on the file and waited for it to load. She skimmed the beginning of the document until she reached an alarming passage.

*. . . alien parasite breached the patient's body through a small, jagged laceration in the infraspinal fascia of the right shoulder . . . traveled through . . . embedded in the patient's abdominal cavity . . . tendril-like appearance extending from the parasite, enveloping the stomach, liver, intestines, and spine . . . any surgical attempt to remove the parasite would cause death to the patient . . . at the time of the writing of this report, the parasite is 10 centimeters in length. It has increased in size by 30% . . . most concerning, the parasitic tendrils are advancing toward the patient's brain stem . . . antiparasitic nitazoxanide insufficient and seemed to aggravate the parasite into growing more rapidly.*

Aidan's body went numb. She couldn't move, like someone had poured ice into her veins and paralyzed her. This couldn't be happening, it was too crazy to be real, it was ridiculous.

No, it was a nightmare.

Her eyes drifted down the screen, drawn to the report in a macabre fashion. Out of a purely twisted need to *know* she continued. She didn't want to. But she had to.

*. . . the likelihood of the patient's survival is zero. Possibility of transmission is currently unknown, but the fact remains that the parasite is an extreme threat. The risk to others is high enough that active euthanasia is highly suggested.*

The screen swam before her eyes.

Even as her vision failed her, she could still see certain words like flames of fire cutting through the icy dread swamping her.

Words like *parasite*.

Threat.

*Euthanasia*.

She was too dangerous to keep alive. ■

# Ex Tenebris

## NOVEL WRITING

**Beniamino Nardin**, Grade 11, Harwood Union Middle High School, South Duxbury, VT.  
Dan Morse, *Educator*; Brattleboro Museum & Art Center, *Affiliate*. Silver Medal

The smoke hung on the battlefield like a lover's lingering kiss. The air was singing the crisp song of autumn, a portent of winter and the cold wind to come. Clouds became russet foxes prancing across the sky in the afterglow of the sunset. The forest was aflame, its leaves burnished in wondrous reds and oranges. It was also on fire, a great monument of a tree groaning with the weight of the flame, listing dangerously to one side and crashing into the deadfall. The collision melded with the punch of mortarfire, shells sending fountains of dirt into the air. The cavalcade, men marching underneath the latticework of branches the canopy provided, were not hindered by the flames of Hell that surrounded them. They were pressing the enemy into a retreat, and they went on stolidly, their faces grim.

A boy, his skin reddened by the sun, marched near the back of the ruck. He tried to stave off the anxieties that drove through him, and he hoped that no one noticed the unsteadiness of his limbs, the knees bending, the muscles aching after a long day of marching without a moment of rest. The boy's hair had grown long, not shorn close to his scalp as it had been at the start of the war. It formed curlicues, delicate brown spirals that mimicked his older sister's violin, lacquered the color of warm chocolate on a winter's eve by the fireside. The smoke of the boy's home, smelling of cedarwood and balsam fir, was in no way the same smoke as the kind that blanketed the battlefield. The smoke of the present was a charnel, charred scent of burned hair and rusted, congealed blood.

A stalwart lieutenant, wide-eyed, his lips twisted in a snarl, galloped his horse up and down the column of men, yelling crude praise, attempted to raise the emptied hopes of the men. Near the start of the war, hope and comradeship had been superfluous, and the boy had felt it like a swelling high; the feeling of being part of something much bigger than himself. He would fight for his country. He might receive a medal for his valor. He would become part of history. That image, of being raised on a pedestal, was ingrained in his mind, and the boy spent long nights staring at the night sky, counting the stars, pondering over what quote he would want to have carved on the lapidary. Perhaps “*Courageous until the bitter end.*” Although, the boy chided himself, that sounded much too high-flown. Besides, most heroes are only deified upon their deaths. The boy spent days wondering about that, too. He was only seventeen, a month or two away from eighteen. Was he ready for death? These were things he did not know, and after months of intermittent fighting—although nothing near the front lines as of yet—the boy had seemed to lose the luster of youth somewhere along the way. He couldn’t pinpoint it exactly, but one day, he realised he was no longer a boy. In visage, yes, but in mind, he felt that he had become a man. He had seen things (and he knew he would see more), indelible things, that he would not be able to speak of.

Frenetic bursts of gunfire hit the trees surrounding him, sending flurries of bark flying, and the boy halted in terror. He felt a jolt as the man behind him prodded him with the hilt of his rifle. The boy whirled, meeting the man’s wild, sneering eyes. “Oi, bloke. We haven’t got all day.”

The boy realised he had been keeping the procession from continuing on, lost in his thoughts, the ache of his muscles winning over his own personal battle and the bullets winning a psychological one. He spurred himself on, a buzz of resolve burning through his blood, and he took strides faster, against the protests of his muscles. His friend Theo, a boy a few years older than him, born in Bristol with as bona fide English blood as the boy, placed a reassuring hand on his shoulder.

The boy met Theo’s hollow eyes, the stripes of grime on his face jarring against his flush skin. They nodded at one another, months of service together fleshing out a certain unspoken language between them. They had been in several scrapes together, slipshod German ambushes or ruthless storms that had caused pandemonium throughout the regiment, lightning and a downpour bristling the ground with a quicksand of mud. They had remained silent in the lorries together, resting their legs, although they hadn’t seen a vehicle in weeks. They were only boys, drafted into a war designed by men. Thus, they marched staunchly, side by side. Through every instance of adversity, the two of them

had prevailed alongside one another. The dyad had developed a distinctive rapport; they did not keep things from one another, and they conversed with a harmonious affinity, relishing in every instance of respite, each growing to become something inexplicable for the other to lean onto.

Another spatter of bullets lapped at the trees around them. The enemy, a patched-together regiment that had been mostly shredded by their own, did not retreat. The few men that were left fearlessly crawled into the boughs of the trees or burrowed beneath the brush, their erratic gunshots making the procession trundle forward slowly. There had been mortar pits, although those had been since taken care of by the boy's own regiment. Yet still the enemy persisted. The boy watched, silent, as a man a few paces before him was struck in the neck by a bullet shot from an invisible foe, giving off little more than a whimper as his complexion was tinted with his own blood, spurting from his carotid. By the time the boy passed him, he had ceased to flail. Death had already taken him, and the boy winced at how quickly it had passed. Something so monumental, a life, should not be over so fast, without fanfare. Barely a glance was given to the dead man as they marched on, the boy's stomach roiling, Theo's warm hand still gripping onto his shoulder, an attempt at reassurance.

The boy clutched his rifle close to his chest, bowing his head nearly to touch his sternum, his eyes focused on the worn path below him. He was murmuring to himself, giving himself some semblance of peace in the chaos that surrounded him, telling himself to put one foot in front of the other. The lieutenant continued his rounds, the veins of his face bulging with the effort. spurts of gunfire continued to rake the leaves of the forest. The boy was bewildered—why were they not charging? They were walking, now, an easy target for the enemy. The boy said nothing; he continued to march onward, praying that a stray bullet did not decide to lodge his heart.

The smoke encroached, a din of whispered voices, the overwhelming press of a hundred bodies in the air encircling them. The heat was nearly unbearable—the boy squirmed as runnels of sweat dribbled down his back, his knit vest seeming clingier than usual. The smoke pricked at his eyes like the malice of thorns, tears wrenching free to wet the grime on his cheeks. The boy rubbed at his face, smearing the mud more, and he felt nothing but exasperation and a dull pang of exhaustion that knotted itself deep in the hollow of his chest. He wanted things, now, of which a year ago he had never thought. He wanted to curl up on the sofa, running his fingertips along the knitted quilt his grandmother had made, pulling it closer to him as he reclined and watched his older sister lift her violin to her chin. He wanted to hold a mug of tea, warm as the

hug of sun, and press it to his lips, hearing the honey-sweet rivulet of melody exude from the motions his sister made, delicate movements of horsehair on taut string. He wanted to watch his mother, curled by the fireside, knit him a new scarf with which to plod through the winter. He wanted to watch his sister, singing under her breath, methodically run a block of rosin across the horsehair of her violin. He wanted to see his father again, somewhere on the front kilometers away. He wanted to go home.

A hand grenade whistled above the men's heads and roared into the ground near the edge of the forest, sprays of twigs, leaves, and dirt bursting apart. A birch tree, its bark peeling off in soft curls like the boy's own hair, tottered and collapsed, the sound of cracking branches like breaking bones. The boy saw, in his periphery, men from the front of the cavalcade break off from the procession and sprint through the forest, dodging bits of burning wood, shielding their eyes from the smoke. The spill of gunfire burst into rapid-fire, and the boy was grateful for Theo's hand on his shoulder, steadying him. Languidly, the pops of bullets broke off to a low, foreboding hush. The sound of crackling fire, huffs of labored breath, and distant, resonant explosions perforated the air.

Rumor and raillery had once flown between the lips of men, but only silence filled that space now. It had been an interminable day, marching from one unnamed town to the next, through forsaken entrenchments filled with rotting bodies and filthy rats through fields laden with smoke, muscles slowly deteriorating with the effort. The boy couldn't imagine how it would feel to finally stop and stretch his legs and feel the same way when drinking a glass of water after a long day, something to soothe his parched throat. The miraculous intermission which sleep provided, a snug blanket, dark as ink, carrying him away from the battlefield to someplace spectacular, the buildup of his dreams.

He stumbled once more, and the man behind him grunted again. Fortunately, Theo was there lifting the boy by the back of his torn coat. The boy was surprised by the strength of his friend, and he righted himself as swiftly as his smarting muscles would allow, shooting Theo a grateful glance. The older boy nodded stiffly, his bronzed neck slick with sweat, his coat and shirt open to reveal the vulnerable hollow of his throat. The boy held himself a mite higher despite the trembles that began to ripple through his muscles.

"Only a bit longer," Theo murmured to the boy.

"How do you know?" the boy croaked, sounding weaker than he had intended. He might have only been seventeen, but he was in the army; he was in a war for his country. He needed to be strong. In the fading light of the burnished sun, the boy felt anything but.

“I’ve got a hunch.” A grin split Theo’s lips apart, his pearly white teeth span-gled against the dust and filth on his chiseled features. “See the town back there? Beyond the edge of the forest.”

Theo leaned closer to him, leading the boy’s vision to the haphazard town wrought into the fieldside. He discerned squat, white buildings like somber rows of gravestones, forlorn and quiet, the lofty spire of a church slicing high above the ginger-colored terracotta-tiled rooftops. The procession worked its way through the forest, heading towards the town.

“Will we be staying there?”

“Hell if I know,” Theo said. “But if there’s running water, you know I’d kill for a bath.”

Triumph rippled through the swaths of men; voices whispering of the nearby town, voices low and ragged with broken hope, too wounded now to let the burnt sugar of *perhaps* flit through their veins, yet still their eyes shimmered with *at last*. An end to an endless day.

Once the cavalcade arrived at the lorn and emptied town, the colonel and the lieutenant could do little to stop the men from filtering out between the houses, looting and scrambling about, striving to find an abandoned delicacy or a pantry ripe with food that might remind them of home. The boy stuck close to Theo, as was his custom, and the two of them approached a misshapen town-house near the outskirts of the town, ignored by the rest of the men, painted in an odd taffy color of bright aquamarine. The door had been kicked in, and the foyer was a mess of shards of glass and ripped up pieces of paper, tufts of wool and raiment decorating the rough-hewn floorboards. Theo immediately made his way to the kitchen, and the boy distantly heard him rummaging fruitlessly in the cupboards. They both knew it was a vain attempt—if the Germans hadn’t taken everything, someone else had.

The living room reminded the boy of his own home in Suffolk, and hopeful familiarity struck him. The walls were bare, overlaid in tawdry damask wallpaper, trying and failing to give this place a luxurious ambience. Twisted nails were all that remained from a family that had hung pictures to give this place its homeyness. The crimson Persian rug that spread across the floor was clotted with stains, rough against the boy’s fingertips as he knelt to touch it. A chaise longue, coated lavishly in teal taffeta, sat by the fireplace. A heavyset birchwood bookshelf—bereft of books—took place beside it. Another armchair, this one wreathed in red brocade, sat across from the chaise longue. The boy nearly scoffed—whoever had lived in this home was tasteless. Or, perhaps, they simply had an extravagant taste for fashion. That was all that remained in the living room—a rug rougher than asphalt, two mismatched seats, and an empty

bookshelf. The boy found himself wondering what had happened here. The stories places had to tell could be gleaned if one merely looked closely enough.

Standing in this room, devoid of any life or love, the boy felt a pang of sorrow purl in the pit of his stomach. The closer he looked, the more abandoned the room seemed—the wallpaper was crumbling in places, curling from the walls; the chaise lounge was covered in streaks of oily soot; the bookshelf was splintering; the slate of the fireplace was chipped. He closed his eyes and felt a mix of homesickness and anguish, a roiling fear that lumped in his throat.

The boy heard movement behind him and quickly shook off the disquietude he felt, adopting a more aloof manner. He flung himself on the garish chaise despite the soot that clung to its smooth surface, breathing a sigh of relief—regardless of its lurid appearance, it was snug, and reminded the boy of his own bed at home. It offered an iota of softness in a hard-edged world. His muscles nearly groaned out loud with thanks. The boy watched, eyelids not wholly closed, as Theo entered the room from the kitchen, cast a quick glance around, and ensconced himself in the tall armchair across from the rough rug. They smiled at one another, a spattering of color in a black-and-white picture.

“Well, this place is horrid,” Theo said, to the boy’s laughter.

“It really is!” The boy sighed, staring at a rift in the popcorn ceiling. The laughter quickly faded from an echo to silence. He heard glass shattering, men shouting from across the road. The boy tilted his head to meet Theo’s eyes. “Find anything?”

Theo smiled, though his eyes were pained, and shook his head. “Not a damn thing. Nothing but an unsent letter and a newspaper dated to five weeks ago. Otherwise—” Theo shuddered. “The Germans cleaned this place up nicely. They polished off all the meat and left only the bones behind.”

The boy inclined his head to the side, then gestured towards the velvet armchair Theo reclined on. “At least they left us these chairs.”

“Oh, Lord,” Theo laughed as he patted the armchair. His joy was a chorus in a cathedral. “I think the Germans were driven away just by this sight alone! We should bring these to the front and throw them over. We’d win the damn war.”

The boy smiled shyly. If only it were that easy. But he gave in to Theo’s jests, allowing a wave of chuckling to calm him.

The last light of the day filtered from the windows, sending shadows across Theo’s face, lining him in sharp edges. To the boy, though, he only looked young, innocent, peaceful. The two of them started a fire to keep them warm as the night took over for the day, spreading its wide, warm arms across the fields, pitching the little town into a deep darkness. ■

# The Palimpsest of Anne

## PERSONAL ESSAY & MEMOIR

**Emma Kilbride**, Grade 12, Austin Preparatory School, Reading, MA. Nicole Putney, *Educator*, School of the Museum of Fine Arts at Tufts University, *Affiliate*. Gold Medal, **American Voices Medal**

DOG—5 points. I snap the tiles into place, building off the D in DROUGHT. Nana stares me down in such a way that is disapproving, but not devoid of love. Her wire-framed glasses are fogged from the humid parlor air, the consistency of which I have heard her liken to split pea soup so many times that I have adopted the phrase for myself. Her eyes shine like marbles beneath the milky translucence. “If you had built off the O instead of the D,” she tells me, “you could have scored 8 points instead.” She shakes a manicured talon at the board, where a condescendingly magenta DOUBLE WORD SCORE square stares up at me. I feel a twinge of shame for having missed the opportunity. She places her hand on my shoulder. “When you’re older,” she reassures, “you’ll know lots of big words, and you’ll have me beat.” She hands me a chocolate digestive biscuit before making her next move: an X placed at the intersection between A and O to make AX and OX—54 points. To her nine-year-old opponent, this is a crushing blow.

Hidden in the constellation of Nana’s endearingly conceited anecdotes are three things she consistently alleges: One, she was the first majorette to twirl a baton on the field at Harvard Stadium in 1948. Two, she was once asked by a sales representative at the Jordan Marsh glove counter to be a hand model, an offer which she nobly, yet demurely, declined. Three, nobody has ever beaten her in a game of Scrabble. The common thread among these claims is the window each provides into Nana’s vanity, a trait I would find irksome in anyone

but her. I am beguiled by the way she stands over the bathroom sink to color her hair, the way she adjusts her pearls in the reflection of the glass tabletop as I recount the day's victories and tribulations. It is in these moments that she transcends Nana to become Anne—sharp, alluring, commanding.

She is Anne when she plays Scrabble. I see it in the way she holds herself above the table, shoulders square, eyes peering down from atop her Hepburnesque neck. I see it in the way she fiddles with her wedding ring, sliding it on and off her finger in deep concentration, for this is not a game to her. It is an intellectual pursuit, an art form at which she is most adept. This pursuit is one that must be won fairly and without concession. To Anne, it is a matter of principle and pride.

\* \* \*

AWHIRL—24 points, a word I learned last week in sixth-grade English. “It describes autumn leaves or grains of sand,” I tell Nana, “when the wind kicks up and everything goes flying about.”

She beams down at me in a tired, but adoring sort of way. “Nana’s girl,” she says to me, the skin around her eyes bunching up like bits of crinkled parchment. She builds off my L to make LEAF—14 points, but it is no match for my next move: QUICK—60 points. I am granted an indomitable lead, and I am suddenly no longer her apprentice, but her adversary. I look up at Nana from across the table, bracing myself for rueful disappointment, but her eyes fill with pride. Her delicate fingers, warm and inviting, envelop my hand. She says our fingers look the same; I wish it were true.

On the car ride home, my mother gently explains that Nana is unwell. “She is starting to forget things,” she says above the rumbling heater, “important things.” Her words intermingle with highway exhaust fumes to produce penetrating nausea. I recall last week when we were driving her home and she forgot where she was, fearful perplexity distorting her features in the rear-view mirror. Pieces click together in my mind to form an unhappy puzzle.

“She’s still her, though,” I say. My voice sounds shrill and distorted, like the rewinding of a tape recorder.

My mother doesn’t take her eyes off the road. “For now.”

Out the passenger side window, Somerville is gray with overcast and mud-died frost. I avoid my reflection in the glass.

\* \* \*

HAT—6 points. I build off the H in HAPPY as opposed to the A, intentionally skirting an emerald green TRIPLE LETTER SCORE square. She chides me

playfully between labored breaths. “You should know better,” she says. “How old are you now?”

This is the fourth time in the hour she’s asked, but I answer as nonchalantly as the first. “I’m seventeen,” I say.

“Seventeen, seventeen, seventeen . . .” She mouths the number to herself, savoring it carefully, recommitting it to memory as she begins to pour over the tiles in her rack. Her brow furrows above her wire-framed lenses, thicker than I remember. I gently point out a vacant TRIPLE WORD SCORE square, pale orange, hers if she uses an S to pluralize GARDEN. “I know,” she informs me, “I’m just thinking.” After a moment of performative consideration, she heeds my suggestion and relief softens her features. Twenty-seven points. “Your turn,” she says, pride permeating her words in a way I have grown to miss. She turns to my mother, her gaze dripping with youthful radiance. “I’d like to visit Helen next week,” she declares, “Helen from down the street.” My mother offers to accompany her. We exchange a hurried glance, silently agreeing not to remind her that Helen died three years ago.

It’s a peculiar thing, the way words are the last to go. I watch as her deteriorating mind seems to spare nothing but the means to articulate its own deterioration—words, that when put together, illustrate a decline, steady and unrelenting. But they are there, and though disjointed, they hang in the air like the scent of autumn. They are constructed of wooden tiles that cover the parlor table, placed with scholarly deliberation between whispered inquiries of day and year. Such inquiries do not deter the careful manicuring of her nails, nor her charming hubris, nor the five-point lead she holds over me after her final turn. She is here and she is gone, all at once.

My eyes fall upon a barren swath of empty board. I have the opportunity to overtake her, but I don’t, for it is a matter of principle and pride. Hers, not mine. I snap a final two tiles into place. SIT—3 points. ■

# A Mouthful of Bloody Teeth

## PERSONAL ESSAY & MEMOIR

**Deja Robinson**, Grade 11, New Orleans Center for Creative Arts, New Orleans, LA.  
Anne Gisleson, *Educator*; Greater New Orleans Writing Project, *Affiliate*. Gold Medal,  
**American Voices Medal**

When I was four, I asked Mama what Viagra was, she said it was something that made a man's penis bigger during sex. I asked her where babies come from and she simply shrugged her shoulders. Why was me knowing about erectile dysfunction medication deemed more important than the birds and the bees? Why did I never ask what sex was?

\* \* \*

Daddy never answered my awkward questions. He would either say, "Don't ask me that right now" or "That's not for kids to know." I eventually decided that I should keep my curiosity G-rated around him. How normal is it for a toddler to understand that her father wants to preserve her innocence?

\* \* \*

When I was six, I sliced my foot open on Christmas. While we were on the way to the emergency room, Mama said, "If you don't stop screaming, the doctors are going to dig in your foot and take out all the bones. Then, you won't be able to walk right."

I proceeded to cry harder. Why did she tell me that? Was it out of love or was she annoyed?

When Daddy is stressed, he moves in silence. When he saw the blood on the floor and the gash in my foot, he didn't say anything. He ran to the back of the house, came back to the kitchen with one of his long tube socks, and wrapped my small bloody foot up with it. Although he didn't speak as he carried me

from the house to the car, the way he held me was comforting enough. My head was resting on his shoulder and his hand cradled the back of my head, he wrapped his other arm around my body and I could tell he was apologizing to me in his head. He didn't speak for most of the ride to the hospital, the only time he did was to tell Mama to shut up after she had scared me.

The first time I ever saw Daddy cry was when the doctor told him that I would need at least 12 stitches. Daddy wasn't in the room when the doctors stitched my foot up. Mama and Brother watched me as I sobbed and let out blood-curdling screams. I found out later that the reason it hurt so much was because the doctor didn't completely numb my foot, so I felt every stitch go in. I don't remember much of the actual process, but I remember when they were done I yelled, "I want my daddy, I want my daddy to hold me!" and Daddy ran in with tears in his eyes and hugged me as I cried. Brother said we looked like a cheesy Lifetime movie.

\* \* \*

I banged my mouth on the floor a few years after cutting my foot. I don't know how I did it or what I was doing before the incident happened, but there was a lot of blood. I didn't say anything because Mama was the only one home and I was scared that she would be mad or freak out or tell me that I would need all of my teeth pulled. So I just cleaned up the blood, rinsed my mouth out with salt and went back to playing. I lost four teeth in the span of a week that year and no one questioned it. I think that was the first secret I ever kept for myself.

\* \* \*

Brother used to call me "fag head" because I would whistle at women whenever we were out in public. His best friend called me the same name and Brother beat the shit out of him. I think that's the purest form of love.

\* \* \*

Whenever Mama and Daddy fought, I usually ran into Brother's bed. It was one of the few times I was allowed in his room. I would ask him the same questions and he would give me the same answers.

"Why do they yell like that?"

"Because they don't like each other."

"Why are they husband and wife if they don't like each other?"

"They're not."

"Then why did they have us?"

"They didn't, they had you."

"Are they happy?"

"Probably not. Do they sound happy to you?"

“No.”

“Exactly.”

“Then why are they together?”

“Because they thought they were happy a long time ago and now they’re realizing that they’re not. One thing about black people, they don’t stay together for happiness. They stay because they’re comfortable. This is just the beginning.”

\* \* \*

Can comfort exist without happiness?

\* \* \*

Aunt V and Uncle T have been in an on-and-off relationship since I was born. They break up at least once every two–three years. Originally, I was going to write about how they’ve been separated for almost two years, which is a new record. I thought they were done for good. I thought the both of them had finally grown up and learned their lesson.

Yeah, I was wrong. They’re back on.

Aunt V is usually the one to leave. I assume it’s because Uncle T’s possessiveness makes her uncomfortable. But she always goes back, probably because her loneliness is unbearable.

\* \* \*

Daddy says Aunt V will never really leave uncle T. “It’s not in her blood,” he says. “Our mother never left our dad, and he was beating and cheating on her.”

\* \* \*

Men in my family love problematic women. I think it excites them. When Uncle J came home to his wife sucking another man off, he shot up the house and punched out every window with his bare fist. I called to check on him the next day and his wife answered. She said my uncle went out to get her some ice cream. Is that love or is it crazy? Crazy . . . it’s crazy.

\* \* \*

Uncle C got a girl pregnant when we lived in Lafayette after Hurricane Katrina. He didn’t meet the kid until we were back in New Orleans and four years had passed. He asked his ex-girlfriend why it took her so long to tell him about his son and she said she needed time to decide if she wanted her child to be a part of such a toxic family. That’s love.

\* \* \*

The women love old men. Daddy is a decade older than Mama, my dead grandfather was 13 years older than my alive grandmother, and Aunt V had her first child when she was 16 with a man who was 9 years older than her. I don’t

know why it was so bad when Cousin R married that dude who was twice her age. Aunt V says Cousin R doesn't call or visit because that old dude made her divorce the family. But didn't the family divorce her first? That's not love. I'm glad she left a family that would rather disown their children than leave their toxic partners.

\* \* \*

I'm the only lesbian, so will I take after the women or the men? Both are misfortunate, yet that's a lot of what I've experienced romantically: misfortune. So maybe I take after both . . . Jesus.

\* \* \*

Daddy says he could never date a white woman because white women hold a secret dominance over black men. When black women are angry they become bitches; when white women are angry, they become victims. Is that true or is it old-man talk? I don't want to believe it's true, but A was white and I found myself apologizing after she cheated on me with a boy who smoked Black & Milds and had three pet squirrels. Maybe Daddy's right.

But is it only white women? Because Mama has a loud dominance over Daddy. He hates yelling and when he makes her mad, she yells. I think she does it to punish him. Maybe that's what being a bitch is or maybe she just has anger issues. I hope neither are hereditary. But the way Daddy talks about it, makes it seem like it's mandatory. So, do I have to learn how to be an angry black bitch or will it just have to come naturally?

\* \* \*

Sometimes Daddy comes into my room to cry. It's usually about how unhappy he is with Mama, other nights he tells stories about how his father would beat him. The most recent encounter was about his father. Daddy walked in with tears in his eyes and I scooted to the foot of my bed with my arms open.

"Come on."

He fell to his knees and rested his head in my lap.

I rubbed his head.

"I never want to be like him. Never. He beat me and my sister and I couldn't do anything about it. I couldn't, baby, I swear I would have if I could. He would have killed me."

"I know."

"I was only nine, I knew I shouldn't have taken the money. I just wanted some candy."

"I know. Shhh, it's okay."

"He swung so hard. Why did he need a wire? I was so small. He left marks."

“They’re not there anymore. It’s okay.”

On those nights, I am his mother. I will protect him. I’ll hold him until his weeping stops and he silently wipes his tears as he gets up and leaves.

\* \* \*

Daddy never hurt me. He’s whipped me once and Mama says he beat himself up for it. Daddy has never hit Mama. She’s hit him plenty of times, but he never fights back. I used to think it was because he didn’t want to repeat the actions of his late father, but he might be reacting the same way as he once did at nine years old.

\* \* \*

Some nights I lay in bed crying about things I can’t control. My girlfriend wants to hold me while I cry, but I don’t want to make her feel like I do when Daddy cries. She shouldn’t have to be my mother.

\* \* \*

I am scared of vulnerability. Alcohol will probably help as it did for my father and grandfather and uncles. But drinking doesn’t intrigue me. I guess I need to hurt more; hurt for a longer period of time. I will have to grow to hate the world around me and the life that I was forced to choose. But I don’t want to hate myself, no one does. I don’t want to hate my life. But Daddy does, and Mama and Aunt V and my alive grandmother, and my dead grandfather, and my uncles, and Brother. I have to hate my life because if I don’t, it’ll seem like I’m better than the people I came from. I’m not better than anyone. I have to be comfortable, never happy. ■

# Daily Rituals

## PERSONAL ESSAY & MEMOIR

**Anna Zhou**, Grade 12, Upper Dublin High School, Fort Washington, PA. Kimberly Stern, Educator; Philadelphia Writing Project, *Affiliate*. Silver Medal

“*Nai-nai*, I don’t want to do this anymore,” I complained to my grandmother. Two silver trays rested on the kitchen table: my own looked up expectantly at me, half-full with pale, shapeless blobs that I’d purposefully mutilated, while hers bloomed with neat, manicured rows of meticulously crafted dumplings. I watched begrudgingly as *Nai-nai* continued her ritual unfazed with mastery over every minute detail: she dipped two calloused fingers into water before delicately maneuvering a marbled orb of meat and chives onto the translucent dough in her palm, sealing its edges with an impossibly elaborate crimped pattern. It all seemed like a terribly complex process for a couple dozen blobs of dough that were to be steamed, dipped into soup, and consumed in mere minutes.

We humans have developed a knack for ruining anything remotely sacred that we can get our power-hungry hands on. Whether it be land, labor, or simply other human lives, *Homo sapiens* have become creators and catalysts of destruction, often choosing “progress” at the cost of desolation. This shift in humanity is perhaps most present in our everyday lives, in an act that many of us do without much thought: eating.

When I look into the history of eating as a sacred act, I turn back to see Demeter and Persephone, Greek goddesses of the harvest, bestowing their divine services to lowly mortals in the form of crops, and the mortals attempting to pay their dues in sacrifices and offerings and celebrations in what probably seems like nothing more than an imbalanced power dynamic to modern people. Yet I also notice the Catholic sacrament of Holy Communion, the suhoor

and iftar meals of Ramadan, the hollow begging bowl of a Buddhist monk. I see the undying partnership between man and nature, the fruits of man's toil under an unforgiving sun.

These practices themselves have not lost their sanctity or significance; rather, the belief and intention of the people who perform them has dimmed. Who can blame them, when anyone can pick up a Big Mac Meal for six bucks at a drive-thru? In an age of ever-growing consumerism, GMOs, and food supply chains, it's easy to lose sight of eating as a mindful act rather than something purely driven by convenience and capitalism. Burger in one hand and phone in the other, we forget the farmer's toil, the Earth's gifts, the hours of care and nurturement. We forget the power of eating as a universal act, as a form of communication and bridge between cultures, as an act of love, healing, and labor. We view our favorite "comfort foods" as guilty sins worth repenting through exercise and diets, rather than bringers of joy, nostalgia, and nourishment. We fail to realize that there is a certain kind of reverence that comes with routine, that there is something quietly divine about the daily rituals of even the least religious like myself.

As a young Chinese American girl born 7,000 miles away from her parents' hometowns, my relationship with eating has never been simple. I used to pride myself on my unnatural enjoyment of "American-style" Chinese food, stubbornly preferring to eat syrupy orange chicken and flaccid lo-mein out of squeaky styrofoam boxes with plastic forks rather than carefully picking my way around the spine of a whole steamed ginger-soy fish on a porcelain plate with bamboo chopsticks. I stuffed my cheeks full with too-sweet or too-sour gummy candy each October, rejecting the array of intricate, flowering designs stamped onto my mom's homemade Mid-Autumn Festival mooncakes. To a Chinese school dropout, the meticulous petals of my *nai-nai's* dumplings and delicate lotus patterns of my mom's mooncakes resembled all too much the smooth, flowing written characters of a frustratingly beautiful first language that I had chosen to stop studying.

But eating turns out to be more powerful than language sometimes. You can forget the pronunciations and meanings of words—you can even attempt to forget where you and those words come from—but you rarely forget the taste of a food once you've tried it and unknowingly savored it, especially when it's gone. When *Nai-nai* grew too old and moved back home to China, I found myself longing for the indescribable comfort of small, delicate wontons bathed in hot, fragrant soup.

One day around Lunar New Year, I call *Nai-nai* in my broken Mandarin through an international phone call spanning 7,000 miles, begging for tips on

how to get all the crimps and creases just right on the thin dumpling skin without tearing it. Almost as if she were expecting the call, she walks me through each step patiently, from folding the skin to chopping the scallions and adding the final splash of sesame oil to broth that greets me like an old friend with a burst of steam. Before reaching for a porcelain soup spoon to meet the bowl, I take a long, purposeful pause.

And then, I slurp. ■

# The Void of Black Men: A Response to Brent Staples’ “Black Men and Public Space”

PERSONAL ESSAY & MEMOIR

**Chris Diwis**, Grade 12, Canterbury High School, Fort Wayne, IN. David Todoran, *Educator*; Fort Wayne Museum of Art, *Affiliate*. Gold Medal, **American Voices Medal**

I’ll never forget the time when I got called a nigger—standing numb and flabbergasted by the vulgar language the old white lady used, I watched as she dashed away from the gas station as if she had just committed a crime. I was 12 years young when I stood outside the gas station pumping gas; my dad had gone inside to use the restroom. I successfully pumped the gas, but I didn’t know how to get my receipt. I asked the elderly lady next to me for her help. She looked at me and saw nothing but my blackness and without hesitation claimed that she doesn’t talk to “my kind.” Knowing full and well what she was alluding to, I politely asked her what that meant, because in my naive mind, there was no way such a person could be so overt with their prejudice—I was wrong. Her racist mindset manifested the false reality that just because of the color of my skin, I was less of human than her—that is the reason she responded to my question with “I don’t talk to you niggers.”

At a very young age, I came to understand that my identity in the presence of others can alter public space. At only 12 years old, decades removed from the era of Jim Crow, Malcolm, and Martin, I understood that my identity was at times seen as a weapon—a stimulus that can trigger the minds of people who see me as less than human. I have become weary of the fact that I have such abilities, and in result, it has shaped how I try to appear in public. Internally, it

has made me feel vulnerable, like there is a void in the center of my person that pulls in the worst from people who see me as less than what I'm truly worth. With that comes a mixture of anger and sadness, yet also a sense of confusion as to why this is the way of life as a black kid, and how unfair it feels to be disadvantaged because of a part of me I can't control. Reflecting on the times in my life when I altered public space, it is shocking how such experiences can come with unanticipated consequences both with the outside world and one's own personal psyche.

A few years later, I found myself in an elevator with a young white lady and her two kids. I had left my hotel room to get a drink and, in that moment, in that elevator, I felt like I had all six eyes focused on me. It felt as if my identity as a black teenager was amplified because of the behavioral response of everyone in that space, which shifted once I entered. The mother stopped talking about whatever it was she was talking about and abruptly pulled her two kids closer and gave me a look of fear and anxiety, like at any moment I would try to snatch her purse or harm her kids. Being in that situation by yourself, the feeling of self-consciousness consumes your entire body. My 6'2" frame felt that sense of uneasiness from which I had caused with my presence. That alienation I felt made me think about how her own children saw me. They couldn't be any older than eight years old, but it makes me wonder what kinds of thoughts enter the minds of these young and impressionable kids, who were witnessing their mother shut down at the sight of blackness. It makes me wonder if there is a possible indirect consequence that spawns from the mother's reaction. Is it possible that her kids will learn to behave the same way she did, causing the cycle of fear provoked by black men to continue into the next generation?

I mentioned how alienation in moments when a black man alters public space can cause one to become more self-aware of their own identity. The same is true when you're with a group of people who look like you. I recall the time myself and four of my black teammates entered a gas station to pick up our midnight snacks. We all were wearing our red warm-ups which was enough to trigger the mind of the clerk who was working that night. He asked us if we were in a gang, and if we indeed were, he was fully willing to call the police and have us arrested, he claimed. I assured the clerk we weren't any sort of gang bangers, but my curiosity got the best of me because I asked him politely why he thought we were. He told me and my friends that the fact we were all wearing the same red warm-ups made him think we were representing the bloods and looking to shoplift or worse. I couldn't be any older than 13, yet I suddenly became aware that we were being profiled by color. This time not only by the color of our skin, but in addition, the color of our clothing which in his mind

made us complete thugs. Looking back on that moment, it made me understand that there are layers to altering public space as a black man, and how at the roots, the stereotypes of black men perpetuate through the minds of people who see black people as less.

After that experience and flirting with the language of fear during my younger years, I began to comprehend to what extent stereotypes can affect the external responses of other people. I had a friend who lived in Chicago. He was the type of kid that most other kids and adults respected because of his mature demeanor. He wasn't only the captain of his basketball team, but he was also remarkable in the classroom. People looked at this young man and saw a bright kid with a well-mannered head on his shoulders. On his way home from school one day, the local police department only saw a black teen. At only 14 years old, he was harassed by law enforcement. They suspected him of having illegal drugs with no evidence. Their suspicions of him were rooted in stereotypes that a black teenage boy walking on the sidewalk had to be some sort of druggie polluting the streets. I feel remorse talking about my friend because he tells me how much that one day changed his life, and how for his own safety, he feels it is essential that he acts with a more passive nature so that a situation like this never happens again.

Stereotypes have plagued the minds of ignorant people who put down others for their race. My father had a situation when he altered public space, but in a way that was unorthodox compared to the many examples I have heard from other black people. My father was engaged in everyday lunch banter with his coworkers, years before I was even born. It is beyond comprehension how this typical lunch setting turned to an open space where men could talk about their blatant racist views in front of my father. They talked about how any time their own children would participate in what I like to call "hood rat activities" such as slashing tires, my dad's coworkers said they would tell law enforcement that it was the black boys of the neighborhood who committed such acts since in their minds, they were less than their own white boys and they deserved the blame since they fit the stereotype. Realizing they were having this discussion in front of a black man, one of the coworkers told my father he shouldn't be offended since they considered him "African" and not "black American" since he has roots from his home country of Cameroon. It's simply ironic how even though these men know my father, and they knew he was a good man, they still were able to be racist with him because they didn't see him as black. The fact that they knew him didn't stop them from being overtly racist, rather, it was the fact that they didn't even identify my father as black that he was able to alter that public space in a way that allowed these men to spread their racist rhetoric.

Over the years, I have learned to suppress the frustrations of my raw and angry emotions. As a result, I have become more self-aware of myself in certain environments which has caused me to act with a more cautious manner. The overt racism that I have experienced in my life has also caused me to be more aware about things with myself. I am proud to be black and I have no shame with how hateful people react towards me. Reflecting on these experiences makes me understand why I always asked them to clarify what they are actually saying. It is because I'm waiting for one old lady or one racist coworker to justify their hatred—they never can. My identity in the presence of racism is simply a stimulus to the false reality these racist people live in. I'm not responsible for hatred, and all the feelings of uneasiness and discomfort that comes from these situations, rooted in stereotypes, are my own way of taking a step into my own black psyche and understanding to what extent I can alter the perceptions of people around me. That void at the center of my person in reality has the ability to bring out the best of people within a public space. ■

# Our Anthem

## PERSONAL ESSAY & MEMOIR

**Jerry Tong**, Grade 7, Pearland Junior High West, Pearland, TX. Olivia Cote, *Educator*; Harris County Department of Education, *Affiliate*. Gold Medal, **American Voices Medal**

My choir marched through the narrow, bunker-like passage. Our four lines trekked shoulder to shoulder and rode along the left wall, avoiding the employees who passed. The halls rang with deep breaths of anxiousness, the thumping beat of nervous hearts, and heavy steps of excitement. Then, we turned towards the entrance where the glorious light of the field gleamed through. The cheers of the crowd ricocheted off the walls. We strode through the threshold and trampled the crisp, emerald turf. Bubbling with excitement, I watched as each member slowly and subconsciously chipped away from our crystal form, curiosity guiding their exploration across the field. A man wearing a red collared shirt waved us over, recollecting our cluster in the four perfect lines. I wiped at the timid sweat dripping down my face, fidgeted with my quivering fingers, and scratched at my itchy, cotton vest. Noticing my antsy behavior, coach raised his voice over the crowd to share his calming quote, which he often offered during rehearsal, “As long as we all look stupid together, you don’t look stupid.” The clowns of the choir glanced at each other and giggled.

It was impossible to imagine that just two hours earlier we had reached the entrance of NRG Stadium. The energy built up inside me seemed to rocket through time. A crowd had gathered before the entrance, almost all wearing the same uniform as me. We each wore a white button-up with a black sweater vest and stiff pants. The pair my mom had bought me were too big, so she had cuffed them many times, and they felt like weights around my ankles every time I took a step. Blanketing my uniform was a thick, fluffy coat that tickled

my neck and tried to shield me from the chilling fall breeze. Even then, my teeth chattered, and my body shook, trembled, froze. I squeezed my way into the crowd and began to wait, like everyone else, for our coach, Mr. Steve.

Catching a glimpse of the trio of glittering, broad Bronze Bull statues leaping through the air, my dad begged to take a photo of me in front of them. As I lumbered past the Toros, dragging my feet, my elbow brushed against a cold metal hoof. It sent a sharp chill through my bones. As if touching a scorching stove, I immediately withdrew my arm, tucking myself deeper into my warm shell. The camera clicked with a blinding flash.

Cutting through the chit-chat, Mr. Steve reminded us, “Hey kids, skim through your binders one more time; we’re about to head in.” Although the rest of our uniforms seemed to enhance our professionalism, Mr. Steve wore his typical business casual attire. His cloud-white hair was parted, as usual, groomed to the side and cloaking his bald spots. During rehearsal, his hair would often flutter when he vigorously conducted us, exposing his balding areas. Though everyone knew, out of fear of being overheard, no one ever mentioned it.

Standing behind Mr. Steve was the assistant coach and a wrinkled woman who was our guide. The guide stepped forward and yanked the glass door open to the elegant, marble-tiled stadium. Waddling through the entrance, the warm, comforting air filled my lungs. Once all the members entered the building, the guide hustled back to the front of our clump. She led us through the halls of densely packed workers and sports fans, and past the walls of Texans’ memorabilia. Finally, we arrived at the underground entrance where we descended the stairs into a dark maze under the stadium.

Beneath the rusted steel pipes and crumbling stone ceiling, a starchy supermarket scent drifted through the air. All of the rectangular tables and foldable chairs were filled to the brim with kids who munched on their provided ham sandwiches. The soft cheese stuck to the roof of my mouth and coated the ham that stretched like rubber, and the wilted lettuce. The halls trembled with chewing, chattering, and chuckling. By noon, all that was left was the faint echo of tense, forced laughter and the slippery, smooth grease coating our fingertips and lips. The uncomfortableness of the thick oil beckoned to be washed off.

After everybody had freshened up, combing our hair with our fingers and brushing the leftover food off our faces and attire, Mr. Steve gathered us into four lines for our final rehearsal before the performance. My heart thumped. I could feel it kicking against my chest. The clangs resonated through my ears. *Could the others in line hear the throbbing, jittery rhythm of my heart?* We chirped the national anthem with our harmony of altos and sopranos one final

time. The workers who were setting up equipment clapped and cheered.

In what seemed like seconds, I stood at the edge of the field, in front of my line. The man in the red shirt led us to the center of the turf where other workers set up microphones. One of the mics was placed before me. I couldn't mess up, not a single mistake. This performance would be broadcast to millions of people who were at their homes, watching the game.

Once we settled into place, the announcer boomed, "This is the Houston Children's Chorus and they will perform the national anthem." I could imagine that from the position of the stands, with our black and white outfits, we looked like a herd of zebras on a savanna. I envisioned my mom and dad sinking into the couch, watching my choir and me set up for the anthem. I could hear my mom yelling for my brother to come downstairs and watch me sing on live television and my brother arguing about how his online game couldn't be paused. I knew for sure my friends John and Eric were watching. They couldn't miss a Texans game. Unbeknownst to them, I was on the hallowed field with their beloved team. No matter how many times I would show them the video, they would never believe it. The tension of the crowd finally reached me, and breathing in the air, I almost choked on the anticipation. Everyone in the crowd stood up, some saluting, and others lifted their hands or caps to their hearts. The moment of patriotic silence was interrupted every so often by wailing babies being carried out by their distressed parents.

My heartbeat quickened. Every bone in my body quivered. I could imagine the audience laughing at any mistake I might make. I could feel the embarrassment. I saw my face on the screen to my right. I was disgusted by how my foggy glasses drooped off my sweaty nose. Yet, I was too frozen in fear to do anything to fix them. Mr. Steve and I exchanged glances as he placed his hand over his heart. *Should I do the same?* Before I could decide, Mr. Steve began to count us off.

My note began with a voice crack, but luckily I couldn't hear it. Yet, feeling the pop in my throat, I knew the crowd could. We crooned like nightingales harmonizing in the evening. To my left, Garret drowned out the other singers around him, warbling in his scratchy voice. I could hardly hear Zach's flawless notes behind me. Mr. Steve waved his hands furiously, his hair conducting along. Watching him, I was reminded of his instructions to keep our eyes from drifting off into the crowd. Thinking about what he said, I wanted to see the crowd's reaction even more, but the urge to prevent another lecture stopped me. The dried sweat on the turf and the sweat of our group mixed inside my nostrils. I could feel my own sweat sliding down my face and soaking into my collar. The sweat began to drip into my eyes, stinging, and I almost reached

to wipe it away, but Mr. Steve had also told us not to move. Instead, I blinked my eyes profusely. Listening to our choir's melodious notes, I noticed an echo. Soon, I realized it was the speakers lining the field, repeating after us like a canary imitating a new sound.

"O'er the land of the free . . ." We were on the last line. One last time, adrenaline rushed through my veins. I focused my voice on the last note, finally harmonizing perfectly with Garret, who I could feel was flashing his wide smile. When the anthem ended, I heard a deafening crackle and boom. With my broken focus, I looked up. Fireworks had rocketed into the endless blue, and a rainbow of colors exploded, painting the sky. Mr. Steve signaled us to look back at him and stand straight. I snuck a peak at the stadium around me. A passage to our right was outlined with the head of a blue, metal bull, and from the opening of the mouth, the Texans sprinted out. Smoke erupted from the bull's nostrils, and as it vomited out JJ Watt, the broad-shouldered player caught our stares, beamed his pearly, white smile, and curled his fingers into a thumbs up.

"Mannnnnnnnnn, did you see that? JJ Watt just gave us a thumbs up!" Zach shouted as we returned to the passage from where we entered. ■

# S.O.S. (Saving Ourselves)

## POETRY

**Maleigh Crespo**, Grade 12, Mississippi School of the Arts, Brookhaven, MS. Clinnesha Sibley, *Educator*; Eudora Welty Foundation,, *Affiliate*. Gold Medal, **American Voices Medal**

They say,  
*God isn't a woman.*  
and I say,  
"The Lord is my savior."

Women are the saviors of  
sons and daughters;  
they are war heroes.  
They are delicately stitched seams,  
deliberate and tucked  
away.  
They are the bread *and*  
the butter,  
spread thinly across  
a nation in need  
of saving.

With our heads held high,  
we smile.  
Arms wide open,  
embracing.  
Fists in the air,  
marching.  
*For Breonna,*  
We will not give up  
this fight.  
Because when we are in our beds  
sleeping,  
The ones who  
*need* saving  
are shooting.

Women are the saviors of  
countries and communities;  
We are war heroes, and  
we will save  
*ourselves.*

Women are not waiting  
in locked towers  
for men in shining armor.  
We will let down our  
*own* hair,  
break down our  
*own* doors, and  
no, we will not answer  
when you call.  
In fact,  
we won't answer  
at all.

We are not sitting  
ducks.  
We are not  
damsels  
in distress.  
We are not  
yours  
for the taking.

For centuries,  
women have been  
expected  
to lie down,

to serve,  
to take  
what men think  
we deserve.

But we are  
monarchs, and  
we will spread  
our wings  
to reveal an  
army.  
This battle,  
not yet won;  
We have been  
fighting  
for far too long.  
We have  
forgotten  
how to  
breathe.

We are war heroes, and  
we will  
reign down  
upon this nation  
in need of saving.

For our  
sons and daughters,  
we are  
saviors.  
For ourselves,  
we are  
saviors.  
Women  
are saviors.

So, tell me again,  
why you think  
God isn't a  
woman. ■

# Crushed

## POETRY

**Jaeden Kapur**, Grade 11, Eastlake High School, Sammamish, WA. Matthew Austin, *Educator*; Region-at-Large, *Affiliate*. Gold Medal, **American Voices Medal**

i used to write so much.  
i used to pour into notebooks all the  
questions and colors and creatures  
that danced around inside of me.  
pens were ventilation  
and notebooks were freedom.  
so when one day at lunchtime  
i sat with the other fourth grade girls  
and found myself  
watching a club meeting through a glass wall  
as they discussed crushes on boys,  
i let the mess of words  
building up in my head  
flow out through my pen:  
*glowing girl,*  
*you glow like the stars at midnight.*  
*glowing girl,*  
*your voice makes me jumpy inside.*

but i hid the words away  
in a folder within a folder,  
the label written in symbols  
that masked the words  
i didn't want others to see.

over time, my notebooks  
didn't fill as quickly.  
the pages stayed crisper,  
the covers less worn.

when the covers didn't feel like  
enough protection,  
i disguised the letters,  
encoded the words,  
cloaked the secrets

in esoteric symbols.

i tightened the cap  
on my pen.

fewer words could escape  
and more piled up inside of me.

i replaced the pens  
with pencils.

the dancing winds  
became a powerful hurricane,  
threatening to destroy.

i buried my notebooks  
in the backs of drawers,

tore out the pages of some,  
shredded the words  
and threw the pieces away.

i fell apart  
as i removed the spiral  
that once held my pages together.

i surrounded myself with  
walls of silence.

the words became prisoners.

i starved them,  
beat them violently.

as i compressed like a spring,  
chemicals reacted inside of me,  
formed something alive,  
a monster,  
colorful and loud,

*don't let it out.*  
*don't let anyone see.*

with thousands of tentacles  
all tangled together.

*don't let it out.*  
*don't let it breathe.*

It grew larger and larger  
but with no room to move,

*cut off its air.*  
*don't write.*

*don't speak.*  
it began to crush me  
from the inside out,  
scraping away at my epithelium,  
feeding on my blood,  
drinking up my oxygen,  
compressing my lungs,  
occasionally reaching a tentacle  
through a hole in a lie.

*don't let it out.*  
*let it die.*

no, Shame,  
i'll let *you* die.  
hatred is your oxygen  
and love is your poison  
and i won't let you strangle me  
any longer.  
as for you, Fear,  
i will not be your prisoner.  
maybe i'm not ready to come out to the world  
but i will not hide from myself.  
i will not strangle  
any part of me.  
i will let myself breathe.  
i will let the mess of words  
that build up in my head  
flow out through my pencil:  
*i don't know what i am*  
*but i know i am not "straight."*  
*i don't know what to call it*  
*because i don't want to try to fit in a box*  
*if it means i have to cut off pieces of myself.*  
*i don't know what i am*  
*but i do know*  
*there's a girl*  
*who glows like the stars at midnight.*  
*there's a girl*  
*whose voice makes me jumpy inside. ■*

# Victory Garden

## POETRY

**Alivia Wynn**, Grade 12, Pace Academy, Atlanta, GA. Emily Washburn, *Educator*; Savannah College of Art and Design, *Affiliate*. Gold Medal, **American Voices Medal**

Looking into your solemnly surprised eyes  
I laugh

Because your guilt is not my triumph  
Because my triumph is in no way linked  
to you and your skin  
or me and mine

Victory is rooted in the forever churning crimson rock in my chest  
It's rooted in me not calling little white girls ma'am  
the way my grandmother did  
It's rooted in the rolling floods of ribbons that leave my mouth and perch on paper  
Victory comes from within

It's not from knowing that their hatred of my skin is irrational  
But from knowing that my bronze casing  
was made by the sun as a tribute to the moon and the night

My victory garden grows completely from my will  
And your guilt, your looks of pity that are supposed to  
Tell me that you are an ally and protector  
Of my crippled past and body—  
Your pitiful look doesn't give cotton children their names back  
It doesn't wash the blood out of white robes  
It doesn't rip the target off my chest

Your gaze and your condolences don't evict culture vultures  
So that I can double dutch in the streets again  
It can't rewrite the stories  
That my great great grandmother had but never told

It doesn't teach blissfully ignorant children  
The story of why willows weep in Alabama  
Or why clay is red in Georgia

This body is my victory and this life is my triumph  
Because even though you're sorry  
Can't turn back the hands of time  
And rip the cotton and molasses from my mother's hands

Even though Tom Robinson  
Was found guilty  
Before the trial started

Even though my hands are raised to the heavens  
and an officer can still shoot

My crown of thorns never falters ■

# Sidney Prescott

## POETRY

**Dante Begay**, Grade 10, New Mexico School for the Arts, Santa Fe, NM.  
James Reich, *Educator*; Region-at-Large, *Affiliate*. Gold Medal

i.

Today, I discovered that my mother sold her eyes  
to a man who equated currency with an ugly  
word that she banned from my mouth.

He refused the taxes, and burned the bank to linoleum tiles.

We are in debt. The topic of the marbles in my skull is a novel dinner  
discussion.

ii.

The will left me four things:

Silk sheets that distorted my reflection

and retained so much heat, winter was a reprieve.

A bowl of soup, with undercooked limbs floating over  
ginger flavored water that I will not eat.

A collection of shot glasses from Jerusalem and  
the throes of Las Vegas.

And finally: a wire hanger indented with a man's  
Adam's apple and a woman's excavated heart.

iii.

Her timer for joy had gone out the moment she  
saw the double lines -- | | -- spelling out  
another year, another man, another life that  
she did not want.

iv.

There is a man at the bottom of the stairs, a blind man,  
who swears he can still see.

The only thing he hands down to his daughter is a boyfriend  
who scrapes the cranberries and bread on his plate  
onto his mother's.

She wants to ask—will I grow a beard like yours?

Will I go blind too? Can I sleep?

Can I just have your sweater? ■

# Wedding at a Concentration Camp

## POETRY

**Liahm Blank**, Grade 11, Adelson Educational Campus, Las Vegas, NV.

Abigail Moyal, *Educator*; Springs Preserve, *Affiliate*. Gold Medal

i wasn't there  
but trust me  
i've heard this story before

white clouds  
the color of smashed bone  
hovered over my great-grandparents' wedding  
when a young woman wandered  
an imaginary aisle  
/delicately-stepped cement/  
through rows of shaved heads  
and numbered arms  
and sickly faces twisted into starved smiles  
her wedding dress floated behind her  
past jagged rocks  
and the teeth of German officers

*she tells me of*  
    *a paratrooper's parachute*  
*shakily stitched*  
    *a white gown*  
        *a dying woman*  
*alive with new radiance*

i wasn't there  
but trust me  
i've heard this story before

grey clouds  
the color of rotting corpse  
surrounded my great-grandparents' wedding  
a young man married

under a chuppah of smokestacks  
the sky scorched  
burning flesh  
masked by whatever flowers they could find  
whatever flowers could grow in a place like that  
inhaling death  
in all its grey  
but still  
they survive

*he tells me*  
*beautiful things don't belong in concentration camps*  
*like flowers*  
*or a wedding*

i wasn't there  
(neither was God)  
but trust me  
i've heard this story before

black clouds  
the color of mangled eighth notes  
choked my great-grandparents' wedding  
an orchestra of barbed wire  
carved music  
from eerie silence  
i remember a violin  
/a voice thinner than evening/  
frozen in the night air  
its tremble masked as forgotten vibrato  
black ribs poking through wooden flesh

*a wedding march*  
*dissipates into the evening*  
*nobody listens*

i wasn't there but  
please,  
let me pass on this story

red clouds  
the color of rusted nightmares  
closed in on my great-grandparents' wedding  
and followed them the rest of their lives  
they live and die under darkened skies  
i only hear about from memories  
mere whispers of a time  
that will remain behind my great-grandparents' eyes  
long after the last time  
i will hear this story. ■

# a postcard from Nashville, TN

## POETRY

**Timia McCoade**, Grade 11, Mountain School of Milton Academy, Vershire, VT.  
Adra Raine, *Educator*; Brattleboro Museum & Art Center, *Affiliate*. Gold Medal,  
**American Voices Medal**

send me a postcard from nashville,  
and let me know that you're alright.  
a stamp costs 55 cents and  
you promised i was worth that to you,  
swirl the ends of the ms when you  
write my name,  
let your newfound happiness  
spill out of  
the cracks of your smile  
and onto a \$1 piece of cardstock  
tell me how you're doing better,  
and forget to mention  
that it's because  
i'm not a part of your life anymore  
tell me you've fallen in love  
(*give me a reason to forget*)  
use pencil because  
you're scared the ink will run,  
overthink it like you always do,  
pretend it's not because you are  
addicted to perfection  
but it's because  
you care  
about your words getting  
to me untouched by nature or USPS  
let me pretend it means  
you care  
about me,  
though we both know  
you're kind because  
you think you have to be.

since this friendship is a formality  
to you,  
be formal  
please don't leave me waiting to hear  
from you  
by a mailbox in the  
viridescent mountains of Vermont,  
you promised you wouldn't let go  
so keep your lie going  
send me a postcard from nashville  
and let me know you're alright  
without me ■

# Lovey's (Almost) Snake Bite

## POETRY

**Bojena Sabin**, Grade 12, Charleston County School of the Arts, North Charleston, SC.  
Danielle DeTiberus, Francis Hammes, and Elizabeth Hart, *Educators*; Savannah College of Art and Design, *Affiliate*. Gold Medal

*A story of my mama, Lovey, who lived in Zambia with her Nana and didn't meet her parents till she turned seven.*

Funny bunny,  
    playing in the  
        dirt, dry grass on  
        her ankles like  
        lace, lays her shell  
    pink palm down  
    thump thump thump  
on an African drum,  
that rich purple  
heartbeat from her  
chest to her feet,  
she has these cherry  
plum cheeks, cocoa  
    curls, she's everybody's  
        dolly, Mamba hears  
        the thick drum beat  
    over the hill, bites her  
tail and rolls like time  
down to her Lovey,  
playing in the dirt,  
our obsidian antagonist  
    the roof of Mambas mouth  
    is black, black, black as  
        though she choked on oil.  
        and oh what a shame,  
    Mama left Lovey all alone for  
London just like Black Mamba,  
who left her glassy eggs  
    damp in the burrow. One day,

    they'll spill snakes  
        back onto the earth,  
        motherless hatchlings  
        shake their scales  
    free of yolk sac and  
    search for a slow drum,  
    slither, wet, through  
the bush but, when  
Mamba coils into a black  
bun at Lovey's  
ankles who will  
    be there to stop her  
        from turning Lovey's toes  
        blueberry mush,  
        who will be the brown  
        eyed eagle that  
threads mamba  
    with her talon,  
lets red fall  
    from the sky  
    in a stream  
from the snake's  
limp arch? ■

# Subway Story for Two

## POETRY

**Jordi Ortega**, Grade 11, Overton High School, Memphis, TN. Shannon Marszalek, *Educator*; Middle Tennessee Writing Project, *Affiliate*. Silver Medal

### *i. Love Bomb*

standing and waiting on my daily commute  
music in my ears, mumbling along to the tune  
hoping nobody hears the bass go boom  
the drums beating on my ear-drums  
probably should put it on mute for a bit  
the subway usually late  
not much I can do but wait  
guess I'll look for a place to sit  
gazing across the graffiti-filled subway stop  
with each piece of graffiti telling their own story  
seeing people of all colors in their own bubbles stop and admire  
my mind remains off my dire subway train  
while looking around for a place to sit,  
I stumble upon a bench with a spot open  
and my eyes glare open to the opportunity  
approaching a bench, I notice a book titled "A Tale of Two Cities"  
so I peek around the corner and spot a girl with a beige coat  
the coat overbears her more than the stench in here  
her hair tied up in a bun looking like a falafel  
with a yellow scrunchie for some color to her  
and her legs wrapped together like a pretzel  
now my mind officially remains off my subway train  
all my brain cells stuck in one lane  
a man stuck, standing in fear of rejection  
and trying not to feel dejected,  
I start working up the courage to sit next to her  
but end standing still and tall like the skyscrapers up above  
stepping on this brown-stained tile that used to be white  
haven't moved a step forward  
even if my legs feel like they're about to give out  
wanting to cover my face with this forest green beanie

but what's making me feel this way  
oh yeah, you

ii. Self Awareness

sitting here in this white-tiled subway station  
been sitting here for so long, its starting to feel like a vacation  
trying to take my mind off the person beside me  
looking at every piece of graffiti with such intensity you'd think it'd owe me money  
sitting quietly in my own little bubble while others walk by  
seeing varied variations of very vibrant vests  
but you know what's making it funny  
each person walking by me and this girl besides me is,  
that they all been holding hands or at least been side by side  
groups of two walking and swinging their hands,  
ignoring everything else except the person beside them  
I guess I can feel that right now with this girl beside me,  
except we're complete strangers, two chess pieces on white tiles,  
I doubt she's feeling as feeble as me right now  
I'm panicking and peer-pressuring myself to speak up  
but it's kind of hard to speak up when you're red from the neck up  
not wanting to disturb her focus on her book  
but might as well say something now or forever hold my peace

iii. *An Awkward Wait*

running a lot of thoughts through my head,  
each new scenario getting rejected by my head judgment  
but chances appearing pretty slim, so my mind makes its judgment  
I'll say whatever comes out naturally, that should be good enough  
my mouth spits out, "hey, what you reading?" even though I already know  
already regretting such a simple question,  
overthinking the cadence of my voice and the way my hands moved in unison  
with my mouth  
and then my train of thought halts on its track,  
she slides her book away from her face and flips it to reveal what I already knew,  
the words, "A Tale of Two Cities"  
I nod my head and look forward once again,  
attempting to contain myself since my guts appear to be have taking butterflies  
as refuge  
pumping myself up while she resumes back to her book,

with her glasses the only thing poking out to me  
so I spew out some more basic questions just to continue this lil bit of conversation I started  
“so how’s the book?” “you use this subway often?” “pretty terrible weather, you think?”  
each one breaking the ice and melting it down to only a drop  
she starts to bookmark her spot in the book with a Pittsburgh-themed bookmark  
so I start to ask where she was from and in return, I tell her where I’m from  
one from Pittsburgh and one from Chicago, both in New York for a new life  
we started exchanging stories and talked for so long,  
I started to think we were the only two people in this whole subway station  
until I heard the blares and loud clangs of a subway train from my left ear

*iv. Exit Onward*

the subway inches closer and closer with each clank, running down the mental clock I got  
she says, “this is my exit” and now my heart starts running in tune with the subway  
I ask her, “if I can have your number” and she pulls out a sticky note and a bedazzled pen  
she asks me to turn around and places the sticky note pad on my back and writes  
she tears it off the pad and stamps it on my beanie that matches the color of the note  
I stretch out my hand for a handshake which she accepts and smiles back at me,  
I smile back at her with a smile that haven’t shown in some time  
the subway breaks the moment of peace we had with its loud brakes crashing against the rails  
she walks forward toward the doors and waves goodbye,  
with her glasses reflecting the “keep from blocking the doorway” sign that she is defying  
I solemnly wave back at her and then the door closes  
she remains in my eyesight for a fleeting moment,  
and then the loud clangs are the only thing I hear  
a sense of conclusion hits me for a bit until I get the sticky note from my beanie  
the note has her name which now realizing I never asked for,  
must’ve slipped my mind and now it won’t ever again  
now a sense of dumbfoundedness hits me,  
making me remember that my train doesn’t come on Wednesdays ■

# We Ask to Not Be Black

## POETRY

**Mohamed Elhassan**, Grade 12, Hammond High School, Columbia, MD. Elizabeth Stocklin, Educator. Writopia Lab, Affiliate. Silver Medal

It is like feathers that jut from naval cavities:  
head plucked & dipped in the indelible ink of

‘depersonalization.’ Arms wrapped around me,  
as I sway with the brazen gale atop the moor.

The hearse carries solemn oaths of ancestors who plead,  
as their skulls are sharpened by the whetstone.

I say to ‘em,  
*ain’t that how life is?*

muzzled by the irreverence of whiteness forestalled:  
bodies of black, roughened, rattle tree-bones.

I sit on a chair that sings hymns of leather & blood imbibed,  
& as I rock back & forth, I am told:

*you oughta be thrown off for recklessness.*  
But you see, I am a kid. ■

# The Blue Painter's Tape That Held Up the Mona Lisa

## FLASH FICTION

**Amelia Jobe**, Grade 12, Boise High School, Boise, ID. Anna Daley, *Educator*; Boise State Writing Project, *Affiliate*. Gold Medal, **American Voices Medal**

As a roll of blue painter's tape, my job is simple: keep the artwork on the walls, leave just as easily as I appeared, and do everything in my power to not make landlords mad at me.

I was assigned to a young girl six years ago. Her dad had chosen me for no reason other than the fact that I had been sitting in the blue painter's tape display case at Home Depot the same day he moved to town. My plastic packaging promised that I would vanish from his daughter's life just as easily as I could be rolled into a cylinder and stuck against her cheaply painted walls.

I met her on move-in day. She was just entering sixth grade and had golden-brown ringlets, rosy-freckled cheeks, and teeth that were just a little too big for her mouth. She peeled open her U-Haul boxes one by one. Slowly, she filled her closet with more paint shirts than dresses and stuffed her pencil cases with sticks of oil pastels. Her bookshelves became crowded, not with Harry Potter, but with art history books and anthologies of Gauguin, Picasso, Matisse, and Monet. Her freckles perfectly mirrored the splatters of paint on her clothes, a coincidence so unique it seemed it could have only been created by Jackson Pollock himself. When mounds of colorful creations cascaded from a box marked "artwork," I realized I had been assigned, not to a painter, but an artist.

That first night we met, after her family was asleep, she ignored her still-unpacked boxes and instead sprawled across her tan, carpeted floor, a colored

pencil in her left hand and a cheap piece of printer paper in the other. She steadily drew line after line until a fragile pink jellyfish appeared on the paper. After admiring her creation, she picked me up from the corner of her room and gifted me with my first piece of artwork.

Her small fingers rolled me into a crooked blob of blue and stuck me to the back of her paper. Delicately, as to not wake her parents, she climbed atop her decades-old twin bed and raised onto her tiptoes to place her first drawing. She pressed against the corners of the paper and guided me into the cracks and crevices of her drywall. She trusted me with her masterpiece. I held it to the wall like it was the Mona Lisa. Smiling, she collapsed onto her bed and stared up at her creation, now pinned above her pillow. It was the first time we had created something beautiful.

The next few weeks were madness. She created from the moment she woke up until the quiet hours of the night. She handed me painting after painting, and I was trusted with the responsibility of bringing our gallery to life.

Over the years, our collection grew and changed, just as she did. I shifted shapes, patterns, people, and colors. I pasted postcards from southern Oregon next to remnants of her childhood art and cut-outs of her favorite Van Gogh. We had created something the Guggenheim, MoMA, the Louvre, and Le Musee d'Orsay could only dream of.

Then, one day, she got the news. One-by-one, our gallery that we had so carefully arranged was taken down and placed into an all-too-familiar cardboard box. There were no more oil pastels, no more postcards from Oregon, and no more galleries centered around a delicately drawn pink jellyfish. The world we had created for ourselves was now methodically arranged in an 18x18x18 cube of cardboard, ready to be stacked in a moving truck and rolled along highways once again. My cylinders of tape had been plucked from the back of her paintings and placed in the white trash bag hanging on the brass handle of her door. Everything we had built was over.

I was never supposed to be permanent. My whole purpose was to leave just as easily as I appeared, taking with me as little paint as possible. But my promises to be disposable didn't change my want to be a part of her life forever.

Right before she left, she said goodbye to the drywall, cheap paint, and ancient beams of her house one last time. In her room, she picked me up from the corner and pulled out the black Sharpie that had been hiding in the left pocket of her paint-stained jeans. Delicately, she pulled my last piece of tape from my brown cardboard center, stuck me to the inside of her closet, and wrote, "pro tip: use blue painter's tape to hang paintings, posters, pictures, or whatever you want on the walls. Welcome home." ■

# Closed

## FLASH FICTION

**Jennifer Chiu**, Grade 11, White Station High School, Memphis, TN. Adrian Alsobrook, *Educator*; Middle Tennessee Writing Project, *Affiliate*. Gold Medal

The restaurant is closed. Lights are off, open sign hanging in the storefront is dull gray. Julia peers through the glass window, blocking out the harsh glint of the sunlight to see into the dimness of the building. Chairs are neatly tucked into the round metal tables, although some of them have lopsided legs, precariously balancing on the tiled floor. Her eyes flicker to the counter, where a plastic fortune cat continues to bob its paw *up down up down up down*, oblivious to its surroundings. The money tree is still in the corner, but it looks as if it hasn't been watered in weeks, leaves bleached yellow by relentless sunlight. Julia takes a few more seconds to scan the interior—but there is no one to be found, no evidence of livelihood.

"It's closed," she shouts to her father, who is waiting in the car, windows down squinting at something in the distance. Baba doesn't seem to hear her, so she climbs back into the car, repeating the words as she closes the door behind her. "It's closed." He gives an imperturbable nod, but doesn't say anything. Perhaps it's the mask, Julia thinks—she's been caught off guard by her own words too many times, especially on early mornings where she hastily brushed her teeth before leaving, her breath quickly reverberating back to her through the mask.

They check more restaurants: Julia peering through the window and shaking her head *closed*, and Baba drives silently to the next one. Beijing Alley—closed. Golden Dragon—closed. Grand Palace—closed. They check three more places before they head to one last restaurant. Julia scrutinizes the sign as they pull

into the parking lot: Panda Garden, in bright green letters, a small black-and-white panda clinging to the *n* in “garden,” bamboo shoots in mouth. This one, too, has a dulled-out gray open sign. Today, they are lucky, because there is no graffiti sprayed on the windows, no ugly words they must scrub out. As Baba unlocks the door (he uses the yellow key) and they step inside, Julia has a sudden urge to climb onto the couch and flip switch of the open sign to on, watch the blue and red neon letters light up. But instead, she waits patiently as Baba checks the stove, the lights, the fridge, the freezer, making sure that they all work. He wants to be prepared in case the restaurant opens again, and Julia watches as he kneels down and turns the wok on, the fire underneath it roaring to life before he extinguishes it with another flick of his hand.

When they’re all done, Baba finally turns the car home—they’re finished for the day. Julia doesn’t know when they’ll stop, how many days it’ll take before Baba finally realizes that they’re all closed. They’ve done this for two weeks, driving around the city checking every Chinese restaurant. They can’t lose out, Baba says, if the other stores open but they don’t. He’s waiting for a go, a green light, but it doesn’t come. Instead, he’s staring at the red banners of the state government as it loads *please wait*.

Julia types, eyes flickering across the computer screen. Business name, location, type of business—these come to her in an instant; monthly earnings, salary—these questions she tosses to Baba. The large serif letters on the webpage say PANDEMIC UNEMPLOYMENT ASSISTANCE, but that’s not what Baba really wants. He wants the blue-red neon open sign to be lit up again, orange-yellow flames of the wok roaring to life, but Julia doesn’t know what she wants. She doesn’t want the looks people give her family when they grab groceries, or the bright red VIRUS sprayed across the windows of the restaurant. But she doesn’t know what she wants instead, so she waits at the red light, red header of the webpage *please wait*.

She waits, because she has already waited so long already, there is nothing else she can do but wait and hope. ■

# Star Gazing

## FLASH FICTION

**R. A. J. Anderson**, Grade 8, Charleston County School of the Arts, North Charleston, SC.  
Danielle DeTiberus, Francis Hammes, and Elizabeth Hart, *Educators*; Savannah College of  
Art and Design, *Affiliate*. Silver Medal

As I sat in the car on that night of my sophomore year of high school, the world was ending, the sky was falling, the asteroid was about to hit, and the sun was dying in a supernova all because Astrid Booker had a crush on me.

Yeah, *that* Astrid Booker.

The one that had been my next door neighbor for forever, who loaned me twenty bucks so I'd be able to buy the Celestron telescope on sale during Black Friday, hung out at my house half the time, and taught me to ride a bike when I was five.

My best friend who knew everything about me and had been in my home-room every year since the first grade. The one who was sitting next to me, driving us who knows where and tapping her foot in what I knew to be either anxiety or anticipation. I think she knew I knew. Damn high school rumors.

Yeah, *that* Astrid Booker.

Now, I was pretty sure I was going to die and not just because it appeared that Astrid was driving me, on the back roads, into the middle of the woods near the edge of town.

I'd thought I'd at least get to see a shooting star, or total solar eclipse, or *something* cool before kicking the bucket, but no. It appeared all my dreams were going to be blown up by this terrifying revelation:

Here Lies  
Sterling Belinay  
Killed in His Prime by His Own Awkwardness  
And the Emotions of a Teenage Girl  
R.I.P. You Fool

I'd considered asking, "Where are we going?" about five miles ago, but I suppose if she'd planned on telling me, she wouldn't have been so vague when we left. Instead, we sat in an awkward silence, the tension rising as obviously as the sea levels did from space.

At one point, I'd tried turning on the radio but David Bowie was playing, which reminded me of Astrid because he's her favorite musician. That reminded me of the conversation we'd had in seventh grade about what song we'd want to play on our first dates which for me, had been this one. And *that* made me wonder if this car ride or wherever we were going was a date, which made me feel confused and uncomfortable and possibly underdressed. My mind is like a train track that runs directly into black holes. I turned off "Space Oddity" and slouched in the passenger seat.

At another point, we'd passed Pam's Diner, the place where we overspent our allowances on milkshakes and burgers at least once a month. Where we made up stories, and songs, and jokes, and galaxies. I ran through possible real stories in my head—what would happen if Astrid and I dated, if I told her we should just stay friends, if we drifted apart. The possibilities whizzed past each other like meteoroids in outer space, never losing momentum and occasionally smashing into each other and exploding.

As we went deeper into the woods, I started thinking about all of the summers we'd spent camping out here, roasting marshmallows, climbing trees, or holding flashlights to our chins and telling each other scary stories that would inevitably make us hide under our own sleeping bags for the night, shaken by every animal that scuttled by outside our tent.

Eventually, she pulled over to the side of the dirt road we'd been driving on and got out, walking a distance away into a clearing between the old pine trees. I followed suit.

She pulled the hood of her sweatshirt up to protect her hair from the moss before lying down soundlessly, pointing up at the night sky when I gave her a questioning look.

We were farther out of town then I'd realized. You could see everything from here, every star in the sky, every constellation. Gemini, Scorpio, Cancer, the Little Dipper, Orion with his belt; it was all there. The city lights couldn't outshine anything from here.

I layed down next to her and listened as the crickets chirped, the frogs croaked, and the Earth spun round lazily. There wasn't any point in reciting all the special shapes or stars or comets to Astrid that night. She already knew them. She wasn't even that into astronomy; she just spent enough time with me.

Even despite the turmoil in my head, all of the rules being thrown into a flux like physics are in Chaotic Space, I still felt my breathing slow as I looked up at the sky that night.

Eventually, I felt Astrid's hand brush mine and looked down. She hadn't said anything to me, hadn't even looked in my direction, but there her hand was, palm up, waiting for me to hold it.

I could've just ignored it, continued staring out at the great oblivion and acting ignorant, but then again, an asteroid could've hit and killed us all right at that moment.

I mean it was technically possible. It's just not what happened.

I thought about all the alternate universes this decision could create. Ones where we were together, ones where we drifted apart, ones where we stuck through and ended up with other people.

I thought about how much smaller the universe would look if I wasn't looking at it with Astrid.

I grabbed her hand, and silently, we continued star gazing. ■

# Family Gathering

## FLASH FICTION

**Sarah Kiyama**, Grade 8, St. John's School, Houston, TX. Ane Ebie-Mouton, *Educator*; Harris County Department of Education, *Affiliate*. Silver Medal

It was that kind of weather. The kind of weather in which even setting foot outside makes sweat promptly bead up and run down your body until you give up on the great outdoors and retreat inside for a glass of ice-cold lemonade. The kind of weather with which describing it as simply hot would be an abomination. The kind of weather that can only be described as sweltering and scorching and stifling. No, in this case, hot just wouldn't cut it.

It was, unfortunately, on one of these days in which Adella was to accompany her parents to visit her family. After nearly two hours in the car, they were finally turning onto her grandmother's driveway. An energetic person, Adella raced for the front door, galloping out of the cramped car and into the AC. Flinging open the door before Adella had even reached for the doorbell, Grandma welcomed them, enveloping Adella in an embrace and leading them into the kitchen, where the rest of the family was gossiping and laughing.

Adella went around the room, kissing those family members she remembered and hugging those she didn't. Finally, she ended her excursion in front of the stove, where something was bubbling and releasing a rich, delectable aroma into the air. Her tía was stationed there, and upon seeing Adella approach, she leaned over and winked.

"We're having tamales today," she said, delighting in witnessing the jubilation spread over Adella's face.

Together, the family prepared the tamales, spreading out the masa, adding the filling, folding, and steaming. Throughout it all, a constant stream of chat-

ter was maintained, filling the room and entertaining Adella as she giggled along to the ridiculous stories her family told. Fantasizing about that taking that initial, exquisite bite and stomach growling, Adella was heartily pleased when dinnertime finally rolled around.

Once everyone was seated, Adella unwrapped the first of many tamales that would be eaten that night. Steam rose as the banana leaf unfolded to reveal a plump, golden cylinder.

The light, moist masa served as a canvas for the scrumptious shredded pork filling in a spicy scarlet sauce. The tamales were delightful, succulent, luscious.

For a while, the sound of chewing dominated any conversation in the room, the tamale pyramid dwindling at an impressive speed. When Adella couldn't even imagine taking another bite, she glanced at the window and saw, to her surprise, that the sky outside was a deep, moody shade of blue.

Her mother, daintily dabbing her mouth with a napkin, followed Adella's gaze to the window. "It's gorgeous outside," she remarked. Various forms of agreement echoed across the table.

"Out here," her uncle mused, "you can probably see a lot more stars than back in the city. There's less light pollution."

Grandma stood up, grasped Adella's hand, and ambled over to the door that leads to the backyard. "Where are we going?" Adella whispered as Grandma unlocked the door and stepped outside.

"To look at the stars," she murmured back, her eyes wrinkling a bit as she grinned. By now, the temperature had dropped back into what could be deemed normal, and cicadas and crickets sang softly to each other. A slight breeze wove through the grass as the moon bathed everything in a cool white tone. Dimly lit and peaceful, the backyard seemed to call at them, inviting them to wind down and relax

One by one, the rest of her family members filtered outside, some eagerly, some reluctantly. As one, they stood together and tipped their heads back, eyes darting between the thousands of twinkling dots that were gracing the sky that night. As one, they gasped in pleasure when a shooting star shot overhead, leaving a shimmering white trail in its wake. As one, they lingered for a few more minutes, a minuscule sliver of their day, appreciating what was before them. ■

# Ordinary

## FLASH FICTION

**Walker Carnathan**, Grade 11, Bishop McDevitt High School, Harrisburg, PA. Josh Yeckley, *Educator*; Commonwealth Charter Academy, *Affiliate*. Silver Medal

James drove home from work. There was moderate traffic, but nothing special. The day had been a fine one. Not great. No, certainly not great. But far from awful either. Ordinary.

Plain cars rolled at precisely the speed limit beside him as he lightly bobbed his head to the tune emitting from his radio. His taste in music was typical. Each window was opened a medium amount so the sweet air of normalcy could waft into the vehicle. Clouds of regularity peppered the sky, a shirt of common color coated James' chest. The simple car rolled to a stop as two average-sized boys in basic soccer uniforms crossed the street: the usual suspects. James had seen their team practice a few times, but not too many. They were okay.

When he reached his modest home, James was somewhat surprised to find his wife Mary already preparing dinner. She was an adequate cook. Their home was normal-sized, indistinguishable from those that surrounded it.

"Anything exciting happen at work today?" Mary asked as the two bit into their tacos. James seasoned his tortilla chip with mild salsa.

"Nope, not really," James replied dryly. "Pretty normal day."

"So no fires?" Mary acceptably quipped.

"No fires."

Dinner ended at an ordinary time, and the pair chose an ordinary movie to watch over dessert. It had decent reviews. They both liked it, but didn't love it. The bed the two shared was not too tall off the ground, but not too short, either. It took only faint effort to enter. Dreams of the expected danced in their

head as they slept, waking up only a few times. Morning's alarm sent James to the shower, where he set the temperature right in the middle.

Another typical day followed. Casual banter at the water cooler highlighted James' day. John proposed to his girlfriend over the weekend. Patty countered the story by complaining about a fight she and her boyfriend had engaged in the previous evening. The atmosphere of the water cooler had been balanced to somewhere between delight and dejection. Neutral. James offered his congratulations, and his condolences.

Again James drove home, the routine growing, well, routine. Mindlessly, he accelerated and slowed. He took the usual route.

Over a modest-sized meal James and Mary conversed, sharing observations and if they dared, an opinion. Never too radical in nature, though. As they talked at a uniform volume, a decent-sized spider made its way up the plain beige tablecloth. Mary, despite her standard eyesight, spotted it first, and let out an unexceptional shriek. James readied his somewhat-tan hand to deliver an orderly doom.

"No, I got it," she commanded, forcing James to return his cocked-back hand to its normal position.

Mary coaxed the spider onto a napkin, and in a brisk yet controlled pace, walked the arachnid to the front door and set it free. She returned to dinner, and shared a warm smile with her semi-attractive husband. Not too warm, though. Ordinary.

Once again the threads of consistency pulled James and Mary to bed, while the gravity of constancy gently pressed their eyes shut. The mediocrity of her slumber allowed Mary to awake early the next morning, when she quietly, but not silently, slipped out of the house. The air was temperate, and her hands on the steering wheel shook uncomfortably, but not uncontrollably.

Muted white paint coated the outside of the drugstore, and a fair-haired man worked the register.

"Good luck, whatever you're hoping for," he said as the scanner beeped.

There were no tune-ups on Mary's car, the stock engine powered her commute. Her look was nondescript, with a plain T-shirt to complete it. Her face was unmoving.

Driving home was a conventional experience. The roads were evenly paved, though not in any better condition than most others. The bumps were moderate, their effects unremarkable. Mary's heart raced, but not too fast.

She arrived at her home and tore the medium-sized package open with decent ferocity. And then Mary waited. And waited. It felt like an eternity, but she was truly left in suspense for only an average amount of time. Ordinary.

And then the two lines appeared.

An exceptional feeling of joy filled Mary as she emitted a loud shriek. She rushed quickly in to wake her husband, who had been enjoying an incredible night of sleep.

“It worked! We did it!” Mary sang jovially, prancing around the bedroom as the world’s magnificent happiness flooded her. The feeling was amazing. Her hair fell perfectly, and her smile was gloriously infectious.

“We did.. what?” James asked groggily, his brightly colored T-shirt glistening as the sun shone brilliantly through the window. Too brilliantly.

Mary giddily shoved the testing device into James’s hand, waiting for the result to impart the same ethereal joy upon him as it did her. The incredible, exceptional moment arrived without delay or disappointment.

“We did it! It’s happening! It’s really happening!” James exclaimed ecstatically leaping out of bed and embracing his wife in an extremely warm hug. An intoxicating, nameless aroma filled their nostrils, and they danced to a wonderful song that didn’t exist. Nothing else in the world mattered except this astonishing, wildly above-average moment.

This extraordinary moment.

James and Mary are normal. Average. Regular. Common. Neutral. Adequate. Plain. Ordinary. And yet, in their own way—they are extraordinary.

Is there such a thing as ordinary? ■

# Ibili

## SHORT STORY

**Michelle Esse**, Grade 11, Rocklin High School, Rocklin, CA. Yuba Sutter Arts, *Affiliate*.  
Gold Medal, **American Voices Medal**

*Mgbele Ibina, Igbere. April 1925*

It is said that Mgbele Ibina [1] is a kaleidoscope frozen in time. An unspoken history looms beneath the white sandstone where a river once lay, and remains fossilized in the emblems of oral tradition. A hill, now reminiscent of an island, devoid of life within. History faintly recognizes a people known as the Igbos that inhabited here—their livelihood, culture, and language erased.

\* \* \*

*Mgbele Ibina, Igbere. April 1802.*

“Oso!” [2]

*Bam!* At the command, I took off. The heels of my feet compounded the soft floor as fast as lightning. I looked behind me, seeing the river blur past in a furious, blue frenzy. A plumper figure loosely tailed my behind, his breath becoming fainter as I gained speed.

“Onwa!” My friend shouted my name in between hefty steps.

I laughed off his plea, and my legs bounded with great force and speed, the adrenaline from sheer mischief carried my body along the rhythm of the wind. Dust flew up in a brown cloud and marked my trail as I made my way towards the center of the village.

*Clink!* I stopped, hearing that my foot had made contact with some sort of metal in the sand. I looked down, but I could not see any metal of the sort. Only the soft white sand that blanketed the whole village. I slowly ascended my line of sight.

Two, six, twenty, fifty. Many pairs of feet sauntered in a single direction, some brown and washed in the sand, some accented with red where the metal choked their ankles. Their feet made this same “clink” I had mistaken earlier for a mere piece of metal on the floor. My heart started to race, beating as fast as I was running just moments ago. I was scared to look up, to hear, to breathe too loudly. My senses had failed me, but I feared what would happen if they did not.

Behind me, I heard lofty footsteps approaching. I turned around quickly, thinking my friend, Anyanwu, had finally caught up to me.

“Commander, foun’ anot’er one of d’m lit’le n’ggers.”

“Hm. It se’ms sm’ll and sl’ppery. Ma’e sure the cha’ns ar’ t’ght.”

I stood dazed, looking up at two huge men blocking my vision and speaking a foreign tongue. However, what frightened me the most was their color. Eerily reminiscent of the white sand I clenched beneath my feet, it lacked liveliness and their facial expressions maintained a sense of lusterless apathy, as if this was routine for them. With the force of both, they swiftly turned me around and clasped pieces of metal around my hands and feet.

Bound. I was now a prisoner of my own body, any slight movement cut into my skin and furthered the pain. I finally took stock of my surroundings. Brothers, friends, fathers, uncles—all immured to their own bodies. At the front of the line, I saw Chief Esse leading the line across Mgbele Ibina.

He looked up at the sky, as if pleading to God, and then slowly descended his head to look directly at me. His hands and feet may have been bound, but in that moment, his eyes spoke volumes no shackle could dare restrain.

\* \* \*

“Ke’p mov’ng!” the rosy white man shouted as we finally made it past Mgbele Ibina and onto the dock of a large boat.

The bright sun beamed off the white man’s face giving him a rosy appearance, a false reality of hospitality. Consolation came, knowing that the same sun still shines back in the home we had departed from. Disdain dawned, knowing that home was now stained with the blood of my people. How dare the sun persist within the face of our demise. Chains adorned our wrists rather than our traditional bracelets and set the rhythm for our feet to follow. Pushed, pulled, and prodded, my feet began to only recognize this rhythm, yet my heart ached for more.

As the chief of the Igbo people, I knew how our story was supposed to end. I had heard from the women of the other villages. They had stolen from us the only land we had ever known. Bloodshed preceded us and captivity in New Land awaited us, the apparent last chapter of our book. More of the Igbos saun-

tered on to the ship in the same rhythmic, melancholic pattern. The sun slowly began to fade away, exposing the true ugly nature of the white man who had grown quite impatient with boarding the remaining people.

A small boy known as Onwa approached me, the rhythm of his feet more frantic and eager than the rest. “Chief, do you know where we are headed? What will they do to us? What is happeni—”

The loud crack of a long instrument met the back of Onwa’s body.

“Speak f’ckin’ Engl’sh!” the owner of the weapon exclaimed.

“Patience, Onwa. Time will tell,” is what I wanted to say before Onwa’s small frame thumped to the ground.

Patience. What a foolish concept. Were the men who invaded our villages patient? Patience had deserted the Igbos a long time ago. Watching my people fill up the ship, I could not help but feel I had somehow failed them. I could not even move to help Onwa as he lay on the floor in silent pain. Will this be the fate of the intelligent and mighty Igbos? No, I must not let it be. The sheer possibility of this fate reignited a fire within me, a fire so strong the voices of my ancestors awakened.

\* \* \*

Night finally fell, masking the shoddy nature of the boat. There was barely enough space afforded to move. Many young boys lay flat on the ground, their bodies still and fast, blinking eyes so wide it illuminated the detailing of the floor of the boat.

“Chineke! Chineke meh o!” A dark figure began to scream a jumble of words in Igbo.

The rosy men appeared in a group, kicking down anyone who dared to speak in their native tongue. More exclamations to God in Igbo filled the room, as people made desperate attempts to reconcile their fate.

I looked to the left, away from the chaos, only to be met with more wide eyes laying on the ground. This time, no more blinking.

I sank into myself as red replaced the brown wooden floor of the boat. For a moment, the scenery of the ship before me disappeared. As chaos had its way, a wave of calmness overcame me. I did not need to look up to see who it was—Chief Nwokeka Esse, my great-great-grandfather.

*The waters will bring you back to us.*

As the whispery figure left the air, confusion ensued. I knew my ancestors always spoke wise words, albeit confusing. However, fear prevented me from being released from ignorace’s grip. I drifted off to sleep.

\* \* \*

*Atlantic Ocean. June 1802.*

Five hundred, three hundred and fifty, two hundred. The numbers of feet have dwindled. Many boys my age have remained frozen on the floor for months now, pools of dried blood encapsulating their rotting bodies.

Even among the devil of death, I could sense a soothing, reassuring presence, and it filled the lonely void within me as I stared out into the vast sea.

In my vision, I could see the water rise high, then collapse onto itself in an embrace. Then a whisper—

*Onwa, listen carefully. The waters will bring you back to us. Lead the others.*

\* \* \*

A certain uneasiness filled me that something big was on its way, that *I*, as chief, would have to do something big. Why, what, how, or when remained a mystery. The next morning, it was clear that we were well on our way to a destination. As I stared out at the rising sun and waves, it dawned upon me.

The waters will bring us home.

The waters will bring us home.

The waters will bring us home.

The waters will bring us—

For so long, we had been held captive. These rosy white men had us in both a physical and mental state of disillusionment, in an attempt to reduce us. They saw us as animals when we saw each other as farmers, doctors, and scholars. They had taken our brethren, our fellow tribes, and looted our prosperous fields. But they could never steal the Igbo spirit.

\* \* \*

*Savannah, Georgia. May 1803.*

The ship slowed to a final stop. We had arrived, but we would not be here for long. The waters had called our names. Even bound by chains, the other Igbos still looked to me for direction as chief. Without any words exchanged, they felt the weight of the situation at hand. I looked at each Igbo individually, trying to remember the faces of my family before we were buried in the trenches of forgotten history. Then, I made my way towards the exit of the ship, where the rosy white man was eager to throw us into a fate of the fields, the sun beaming on his face once again. Each step I took towards my fate was with purpose. My last purpose.

A few steps before I reached the white man, who had his back turned, I stopped. I stomped my feet twice, feeling the beat reverberate within my heart. The chains constricting my movements, I jumped up in a frenzy, a frenzy that

emulated the emotional state I was in. I yelled with all my might and the power of my ancestors. With that scream, came the might of several Igbos running towards the exit. Screaming, relinquishing the fear of captivity and embracing chaotic liberty. I charged toward the white man, who now realized what was unfolding before him. In a pitiful panic, he ran away, looking for help against his prisoners turned monsters.

Finally the rhythm of our feet was meaningful as we stomped to our death. We continued to march until we reached the edge of the ship, hand in hand. The water below us appeared welcoming, mirroring our determination.

Ibili—rise.

It was time.

With no white authority watching us, we had the chance to run free. But we knew there was no point. We were in a land unknown, where we were seen as commodities. It was an illusion of liberty that led straight back to captivity. Our minds were made up. This was our last opportunity to die truly free. To reclaim a victory so wrongfully robbed from us. I looked over at Onwa, who was standing right next to me. Small in size, but mighty in pride, he nodded at me. Then he let go.

Fall.

And so the waters brought.

[1] *Mgbele Ibina*: A mountain located in Igbere

[2] Oso: Igbo for “Run” ■

# Her Vision

## SHORT STORY

**Maya Anvar**, Grade 9, The Kew-Forest School, Forest Hills, NY. Narges Anvar, *Educator*; NYC Scholastic Awards, *Affiliate*. Silver Medal

Nourabad was a small, peaceful village in western Iran. Nature encompassed everything, from the wide, welcoming grassy fields to the rocky mountains looming in the background. Narrow streams crisscrossed between and around the old-fashioned mud houses that blended in with the surrounding nature. Birds chirped, perched in tall trees that held ripe, juicy fruits. They chirped as they drank from little streams. They chirped as they hopped merrily along, and they chirped as they spread their wings and flew in the sky, as free as the wind. The villagers all worked for the community as shepherds and harvesters. Since the village was small, everyone knew each other. Every passerby would know your name and warmly greet you like an old friend.

That is until one harsh summer arrived, taking away the rain and replacing it with a hot, burning sun. The birds stopped singing their joyful songs, and the flowers drooped helplessly, begging for water. All the crops wilted under the blazing sun, which had been mercilessly beating on the village for days on end. Soon enough, the people ran out of water, and with it, their food.

Twelve-year-old Shirine couldn't sleep. She tossed and turned in her bed for hours, but the sleep she longed for never came. Her mouth was dry and her stomach was empty, as it had been for the past thirty-six days. They'd been rationing all the water, grains, and bread they had, to have enough during the rest of the drought, however long it would be.

How long would she survive in this drought? Would she wither away like the crops had?

Turning around in bed and thus twisting up her blankets, her discomfort made her decide to leave her house to go for a walk in her safe village. In the dark of her house, she slowly and silently walked on her toes so as not to wake her father, sleeping in his room.

Shirine felt like she was gliding as she passed the rows of houses outside, and then floating through a nearby farm. That's how night always made her feel, peaceful, tranquil, as if her arms and legs were made of something light and feathery, like wings. She flowed along that way until she reached the foot of the mountain by her village.

Carefully, she grasped a boulder and climbed up, higher and higher, gazing at the endless sky, dotted with stars. She reached a small clearing overlooking a once-flowing waterfall. A gentle wind rustled through the dry grass.

Shirine looked down the mountain to her beloved village, Nourabad, desperately clinging onto life. She looked at the moon, at her kind, motherly face.

"Why must we suffer?" she asked.

The moon didn't answer.

"There is always a reason for everything," her father had told her when her mother left the world. Perhaps her mother had other work to do, elsewhere, he had told eight-year-old Shirine, holding her in his arms as she cried and cried.

"We can't always understand the reason for things, but we must stay strong and have courage no matter what," he had said, tenderly stroking her hair as a tear rolled down his own face.

What could be the reason for the famine? All it brought was despair, death, and emptiness. Sitting under the moon, wondering, Shirine suddenly heard the faint sound of someone playing the tanbur, a string instrument used for spiritual reflection. Drawn to the celestial, rich sound, she stood and started walking across rocks, in the direction of the music. She approached a weeping willow with a curtain of vines hanging down from it, dancing and swaying in the wind.

Shirine gently drew back the vines and gasped. In the middle of a ring of miraculous, fresh grass sat a striking woman in a flowing white gown, her long black hair dancing in the wind to the music of her tanbur. The green grass and flowers circling the woman contrasted with the barren, dry land everywhere else. Her face seemed to glow with a sort of inner radiance.

Not seeming to notice Shirine, she played her music with closed eyes and a blissful expression. Shirine silently edged closer to her and sat at her feet. She closed her eyes and let the music wash over her, feeding her with emotion.

Abruptly, the woman stopped playing her tanbur and gazed right into Shirine's eyes. She seemed so familiar, but Shirine could not quite place her. Then, the woman spoke.

“Don’t worry, Shirine,” she said gently. “Your people will survive. A new birth will bring life.” The woman stood and walked away without a sound, taking her tanbur with her.

Shirine looked at the place where the woman had been sitting. Where had the fresh grass and flowers gone? All that was left was dry soil. Perhaps—perhaps she had just *imagined* the woman. Perhaps her hunger and thirst had made her see things.

Dazed, Shirine hurried home, wondering about what had happened. It *couldn’t* have been true. And yet, it had seemed so real!

“You seem very quiet,” remarked Shirine’s father the next morning during their daily walk to a field where the last streams of water were.

“Yes,” she replied, not caring to explain. What was there to say? She had resolved not to tell anyone about last night’s vision. What good would it do except bring false hope?

After seventy-five days of drought, people were in despair. The ruthless sun burned all the crops and killed many farm animals with its wrath. The people all depended on a single stream for water, as all the others had dried up, and this last surviving trickle of water was sure to dry up in the next few days. Many people were on the verge of starvation, and Shirine and her father were no exception. Some people even had to sacrifice their own horses and sheep for meat. As the days grew hotter and drier, the people became more hopeless.

On the eightieth morning of the famine, Shirine awoke and left the house with a dry loaf of bread to give to the old lady, Afsaneh, next door. But what she saw when she went outside was not the famished, miserable village she was expecting to see.

All the streams that were previously dried up were now bubbling with cool, fresh water, and the ground was moist under her feet. There was a refreshing breeze flowing about, and for once, the sun had ceased to beat down upon them. A feathery cloud, like a veil, had finally floated in front of it.

*Was this a dream?*

All around her, people were coming out of their houses, crying with delight and jumping for joy. Shirine’s father came out and put his hand on her shoulder.

Just then, a door opened, and out came Mahtab Khanoom, cradling her newborn baby.

Shirine caught her breath. Could it have been true after all? The woman *had* said that a new birth would save them.

Everyone, including Shirine, crowded around the baby, praising her lovely eyelashes and hazel eyes. “Her name is Leily,” announced Mahtab Khanoom. She let Shirine hold the sweet baby, who had, maybe, just maybe, saved their lives.

Days went by, then months, then years. As Shirine grew, so did Leily. Leily grew into a beautiful young lady who always helped the village with her kindness. When Leily was ten, she found a baby bird drowning in a pond, saved it, and fed it insects and berries throughout the night to keep it alive. At age twelve, she rescued a little boy who was sinking in the mud. For all the acts of kindness Leily continued to perform, the villagers of Nourabad called her the Village Protector.

Leily and Shirine had a very strong bond. As adults they started an organization that sent food to the poor, and they helped their neighbors through difficult times.

Every year, on the day that the famine had ended, and also the day of Leily's birth, the villagers would have a festival with flowers, food, and music.

On the night of the twentieth anniversary of the end of the famine, Shirine was climbing up the same mountain she had gone to for the first time all those years ago. She had made it a tradition every year to visit the same landmarks.

*There* was the same boulder she had climbed. And *there* was the same path she had followed to reach the woman she had seen, or imagined seeing. It was all the same, except that the mountain was once again flourishing and bursting with color. The waterfall was back, pouring down with large quantities of water. Shirine followed the rocky path to the weeping willow with the curtain of vines. Now, they were so long that they reached the ground.

Shirine gently pushed aside the vines and stifled a gasp.

The woman was back again! No, it was Leily. No, Leily was the woman. They were the same person!

Leily was sitting in the middle of the clearing, the wind blowing her hair, causing it to float up and down with the breeze. She was holding her tanbur. With closed eyes, as if about to start playing, she had the same serene expression on her face, and looked as if she was far away in another world.

"What—how?" Shirine gasped in awe. How had she never realized? She had never connected Leily and the woman in her vision until now.

Leily's eyelids fluttered open, and she answered Shirine with a smile.

"Shirine, it's time for me to go. You are the new Village Protector. My spirit always knew that you would be my successor." She stood up and kissed Shirine's cheek with sisterly affection. Then, she turned around and walked away, until she disappeared from sight. ■

# Of Pumpkin Bread

## SHORT STORY

**Fernanda Carrera Ovalle**, Grade 10, Archimedean Upper Conservatory School, Miami, FL.  
Micaela Donabella, Educator; Region-at-Large, Affiliate. Silver Medal

*Pumpkin Bread* by Lily Woods

*“Don’t move,” Old Roller Pin said to Sweet Dough. “Ever.”*

*The flour around Sweet Dough fell. “Ever?”*

*Old Roller Pin shook his head. “Never. Stay still.”*

*Then the pin hit the dough to knead it. He said that’s what had to happen to make Pumpkin Bread. That there was no other way for it to be ready. And then the worst part would be the oven. Sweet Dough was scared. “Oven?”*

*Yes. Always the worst part. The dough went in the oven and baked.*

*When he came out, he couldn’t speak anymore. He was no longer Sweet Dough.*

*Old Roller Pin turned to the flour on the floor. “And that’s how you make Pumpkin Bread.”*

I read Lily’s narrative over and over again. It stood out against fantastical anecdotes of princes riding off into golden fields and brief encounters with dinosaurs running across New York City. This lost the gleam of magic sprinkled into the essence of childhood somewhere along the making of pumpkin bread.

There was something about the exchange that couldn’t seem to settle into what should’ve been a playful background painted by a second-grader. I couldn’t quite decide what it was—the actual events? The dialogue? Ending?

I thought about how she’d tugged on my sleeve when I’d handed out the assignment. Her thin eyelashes had blinked up and down as she asked me what to write about. I stooped down to the seven-year-old’s height, surprised that

she'd spoken. I never wanted to push her too hard to speak, but it often became a problem when she refused to utter a single word.

*Anything that means something to you. It could be a dream. It could be about someone you know. Turn it into whatever you want it to be.*

She'd nodded and went back to the seat at the far corner of the room. Her little body slunk down in the chair as she took a sunshine pencil to the wide-ruled paper. I kept my eye on her at first, curious of the ideas that ran through her head. After a while though, I was distracted by the bubbly questions that seemed to pop up from all the other students . . . If they could make me a drawing so I knew exactly what they meant when they said, "Purple all-knowing robot," if the talking car could be a villain, or if they could name the pretty pink pirate after me.

I had fielded little comments and questions left and right until Lily suddenly got up and placed her paper on my desk. Before taking her seat though, she stood next to me and waited until I gave her my full attention. Her little hands motioned for me to kneel, to which I obliged, and then she whispered something in my ear.

*Read it carefully. Please.*

No other words trailed behind her as she went to her seat, and I glanced back at the paper on my desk.

Read it carefully.

\* \* \*

I grab the stack of colorful stories and work my way through the rows. The papers are covered in blue ink, comments lining the borders. The little girls and boys giggle as they read through them, some of them stopping to tell me that yes, they agree that there is nothing as wholly wonderful as a fanciful puppy who part-times as a ballerina.

When I reach Lily, the last desk, I've run out of stories.

Her eyebrows furrow as she stares at my empty hands. "Didn't you read it?"

I nod and lean closer. "I just want to ask you some questions. Before heading out for lunch, could you give me two minutes?"

She shakes her head, hazel eyes trained on mine.

"Why not? Is there anything wrong?"

I see tears beginning to fill up her eyes as she shakes her head again. Her hands automatically come up to rub her jacket's sleeves across her face as she snuffles. She's among the wealthier kids in the school, so she's clad in a white denim jacket and blouse that must cost more than my fine polyester closet.

I pull a tissue from one of the cubbies in the room and hand it to her. “You can talk to me, Lily. I’ll listen.”

This only succeeds in the girl crying harder as she blows into the tissue. “No, I can’t. Didn’t you read it?”

The story? “Of course I did.”

“No, no you didn’t.”

I try to grasp for any fragments of understanding as I naively attempt to make sense of what she’s looking for. She needs me to see what I’m apparently blind to, and it’s important enough to trigger an onslaught of tears . . .

“Can you explain it to me?”

“No,” she forces out from behind her jacket sleeve.

“Okay then. How about you write me another story? Maybe it’ll help me understand the first.”

She seems to think about this for a moment or two, and it gradually calms her down. “Okay,” she sniffs. “Promise you’ll pay attention.”

I hold out my pinkie, the most prevalent equivalent of a life bond in the second grade, but she shakes her head.

“Pinkie promises don’t mean anything.”

I stand in shock for a moment before putting my hand down. “I promise.”

She nods, satisfied, and turns back to her desk. I take this as a signal I should leave, so I head back to move on with the lesson. Throughout the recommendations on how to better vocabulary and demonstrations fixing grammar mistakes, her words run through my head. I’m clearly missing something, but I don’t know how much more in-between-the-lines I can look. How much is there to an account of pumpkin bread?

\* \* \*

When Lily’s mother comes to pick her up, I ask if we can speak for a couple of minutes. She’s a deathly pale woman whose bones stand out against her long-sleeved shirt while paper veins blend into a thin skin. There’s no doubt she’s young, perhaps 29 or so, but she may have suffered from an illness or condition of some sort. Still, behind her pallid complexion, it’s easy to see a shadowed beauty. Chestnut hair frames an angled face sweetly, and her eyes are a honeyed gold. I half-expect her to dissolve into a million autumn leaves.

As Lily packs up her notebooks and pencils, she walks over to my desk. “Is something wrong?” I hesitate before answering, unsure of how to broach the subject. “Perhaps; that’s what I wanted to talk to you about. Lily’s been displaying behaviors that are . . . unusual for someone as young as she is. When I was speaking to her today, she began to—”

"She spoke to you?" her mother asks, stunned. There's no trace of negativity in her voice, simply shock.

I cock my head to the side. "Uh, yes, we were discussing her story." She glances back to her daughter, who's staring at us intently. "You must have made quite an impression on her. I'm the only person she ever talks to."

I try to conceal my surprise as I continue. "Well, that would be an example of one of the behaviors I say is unusual for such a small child. She's absolutely brilliant, but she doesn't talk to anybody. She prefers to eat alone, has no friends . . ." Her story comes to mind as I go through the list of things I've noticed over the course of the year. "This is going to sound irrelevant, but how does your daughter feel about pumpkin bread?"

Her mother blinks a couple of times, confusion etching its way onto her face. Still, she answers the question. "She hates it. Well, she only tried it once—her father insisted—but she threw up. Ever since, she refuses to eat anything remotely related to pumpkin." I see her eyes drift to the clock, after which she immediately jumps a little in her shoes. Her hands clutch the peppermint purse to her side as she gives me an apologetic look. "Mr. Montgomery, I appreciate the concern and I promise I'll try to talk to her about it. I'm so sorry, but I have to go. I do understand that this is important, and I regret having to cut it short, but I can't be late."

The sense of urgency in her voice startles me. "Absolutely, have a nice day."

She gives me a tight smile before finding Lily. Her daughter latches onto her, bunching up the fabric of her pants with her little hands. I watch them nearly run out of the room, noting how notoriously long and thick her mother's clothes are for the weather.

\* \* \*

### Teacup by Lily Woods

*Tiny Mouse is quiet in his hole in the wall, his little body hiding behind a purple teacup. Angry Cat runs in circles all over the room, looking for the mouse. He grows angrier when he doesn't find it, jumping onto the chairs and tables. "I told you to be quiet, Tiny Mouse. You weren't and Owner heard us. Did I not warn you?"*

*No one moves.*

*"Now the Owner will want to know what was happening. He'll want to know who broke the vase."*

*Tiny Mouse stayed silent. He tries to look around the teacup, but he looks when Angry Cat is facing his direction. He won't ever move at all now.*

*Angry Cat comes running towards him, but Hero Mouse jumps in front of the teacup. "Move," the cat says.*

*Hero Mouse shakes her head, so Angry Cat pushes her out of the way. Tiny Mouse doesn't see what happens. He waits until, ten minutes later, Angry Cat walks towards him, calm now. When he moves the teacup, Tiny Mouse sees Hero Mouse. She is now the teacup.*

*Angry Cat puts his paw on the mouse. "That's what had to happen."*

My eyes run over the story once more, pulling phrases from the paragraphs. Blood seems to pump a little faster as my heart gingerly begins to bang itself against my chest.

I feel my breath catch in my throat as I reread the last lines over and over again. *She is the teacup.* Lily wouldn't have named the story "Teacup" if it hadn't been important. *She is the teacup.*

I go to the first line, almost moving past it before my eyes catch the words. *Purple teacup.* It became *She is the teacup.*

I must be mistaken.

Words from her previous story start floating into my head. I slowly drag myself to the counter, where I placed it just in case some wave of understanding magically hit me in the middle of the night. Everyone else's files were back at school, but I had taken "Pumpkin Bread" home with me.

Why would you write a story about something you hate?

My eyes skim the few sentences as phrases begin to stand out among the rest. *Don't move. Stay Still. Hit the dough. Had to happen. No other way. Scared. Worst part. Couldn't speak anymore.*

I immediately compare it to the new one. *Hiding. Grows angrier. Told you to be quiet. Pushes her out of the way. She is now the teacup. Had to happen.*

I feel bile rise in my throat as the elaborate strings of metaphors begin to weave themselves together in my head. Images of Lily's mother.

Her bones.

Translucent skin.

How she never wears clothes showing any skin besides her face and hands. How she jumps at the sight of the time.

The urgency with which she said she couldn't be late. Then my thoughts go to Lily.

How she told me to pay attention.

How she burst into tears when I told her I didn't understand.

How she clings to her mother.

Doesn't speak to anyone.

Has no friends.

In a soberly drunken haze, I make my way to my computer and begin typing up every instance in which I can recall observing odd behaviors. As my fingers type their way through the list, my mind begins to pick up momentum. I make a note of her mother's condition. In a newfound frenzy, I type up Lily's stories, attaching scanned copies to the document in addition. I make sure to detail her words to me and write a thorough analysis of her writing.

But this isn't hard evidence.

The reasoning for my conclusion is largely based on mere observations on stories centered on talking animals and inanimate objects. She hasn't explicitly suggested that anything is wrong . . .

What if I'm wrong?

The doubt inches its way into my head right before I click save. This isn't a light accusation. It could disrupt her parent's lives beyond repair, not to mention the damage it would inflict on Lily's childhood.

I chew on my bottom lip. Does the risk outweigh the possibility that I'm right? I have a—not only legal—but moral obligation to report suspicions. This could save her life, and her mother's.

In the end, there's no doubt about it.

\* \* \*

School goes on as normal the next day.

My trepidation goes unnoticed in the absentmindedness of daily routines, the only difference stowed in a cloaked secret.

At the end of classes, Lily approaches me. "Did you read the story?"

I can't tell her what I did, so I nod.

A beat of silence pass before I kneel down to her height. "You're not okay," I whisper, dragging the words out so they'll be able to carry their weight. It's not a question, but I need to know if I did the right thing. If I listened the way I promised to.

Tears begin to fill her eyes as she blinks in shock, and I feel a pang in my chest as I pull her into my arms. After a moment, she holds onto me as tightly as I saw her hold onto her mother. As she shakes her head vehemently and mufles sobs in the fabric of my shirt, I can't help but wish we didn't have to wait for other people to fix this.

With sweater paws, she wipes at her little nose and tries to clear her eyelashes of tears. I don't let go until she does, at which point she looks up at me.

"Thank you for paying attention." ■

# Swimming Lessons

## SHORT STORY

**Ella Harrigan**, Grade 12, Interlochen Arts Academy, Interlochen, MI. Mika Perrine, *Educator*; Kendall College of Art and Design of Ferris State University, *Affiliate*. Gold Medal, **American Voices Medal**

It was bright and our shadows moved together. They merged into one and back into two as we talked, joined as we leaned in, separated as we stretched in the New York heat. Sam splayed out on the grass, his shirt unbuttoned. A blade of grass sat in between his teeth, bobbing gently.

He wore wealth carelessly, like the truly rich do. It just seeped out of him; it stuck to his pores. He didn't think much about money, losing one-hundred-dollar bills, shedding cash like dead skin. But even then, dressed in thrift-store clothes, he lounged like a prince. That's another thing about the rich. They know how to strike a pose.

Back then, I didn't know how to pose. We were only sixteen, and I still studied the world around me like I'd get tested on it, always preparing for some cosmic pop-quiz. Sam was my best friend, and so I studied him most of all. I loved watching him. I stole the way he smoked for a poem, his parents' tax evasion for an essay. I studied the way he walked into class, his body slanting backwards as if willing him not to come in.

I met him when we were fifteen and I had just moved to New York. I got a scholarship to a school full of overachieving rich kids and sat next to him one day after the subway made me late to class. We fell into friendship, spending hours a day with each other.

I'd gotten into the school through a combination of luck and desperation, compiling financial aid documents and teacher recommendations like protective amulets, writing an earnest personal statement about how I was sure the school would change my life. He, on the other hand, ended up there after getting kicked out of his previous school, and the school before that, and the school before that.

That day in the park, he told me a story. He used to free-dive in St. Barts, hold his breath and swim until he was close to breaking. He loved it—the blue speed of his body pushing against the water, the world blurred. The hugeness of the ocean and him in it, how easy it would be not to come up for breath. More than anything, he loved the moment right before breaking the surface and gasping for air. He loved prolonging it, getting closer and closer to passing out.

Once, the summer he was thirteen, he almost drowned. He waited half a second too long and, instead of coming back up to the surface, he started sinking downward. Half-conscious, he felt himself fall. He told me he didn't know exactly how, but he found the strength to come to the surface. He floated there for a long time, eating the air. He didn't tell anyone what happened. He just swam to the shore and walked home.

When we were teenagers Sam was magical, unbruised by danger. One Friday night, the fall of our junior year, he told me as much. We'd just smoked a joint and had been laughing about the sound of our own laughter, cuddled up together in the corner of this girl Louise's room at her party. There were bad songs playing and drunk boys wearing their dad's watches trying to sing along. But the room was warm and full of smoke and everything was fuzzed in a lovely, unfamiliar sort of way. Someone had put a plastic flower crown on my head and it balanced there as Sam and I laughed, clutching each other.

After we stopped laughing, he got quiet. He leaned in. His eyes red and serious, he told me his body could take anything, especially his lungs. He had blessed lungs. Lungs that were born with asthma and then cured with cigarette smoke, lungs which let him inhale for thirty seconds straight, lungs which held enough air to last him seven minutes, eight minutes, nine minutes underwater. He was untouchable, he told me then. He was safe.

It was around then when he started spending more time with people I didn't know, kids from different schools who invited him to parties in abandoned apartment complexes and raves in old meatpacking factories. He had always been on the edge of things, showing up to school with a bottle of vodka and a wink, but it was different now, more serious. In French class he picked MDMA out of the crevices of his pockets, sorted it out from the tobacco and weed flecks around it.

That winter, when midterms came around, we studied together like we always did, which meant me working and him keeping me company. I wrote out pages and pages of notes, cried into my Chromebook's plastic keys. He gave me his coat and told me stories, jokes, little bits of comfort. "Those writers you love never cared about school, anyway. You think Frank O'Hara was good at Calc AB?"

"They didn't have Calc AB when Frank O'Hara was alive." I said, wiping my eyes and laughing.

"You're smarter than anyone else here." he said, gesturing with a chunk of pumpkin muffin in his hand.

"At this cafe? Maybe."

"At the school." He paused for dramatic effect. "You're the only one who can keep up with me."

"You're so fucking obnoxious." I sniffed and pulled his coat close to me. "Shut up and eat your muffin."

Sam didn't show up the morning of the Calc midterm. I did well, concentrating so hard I developed a pulsing headache and the numbers started to blur in front of me. Sam got to school at noon, walking with a limp. There was a crust of vomit on the back of his shirt and dried blood around his nose.

When he saw me in the hall, he waved his hand vaguely and kept walking. There were no jokes today. When I went after him and asked what happened, he told me his parents were out of town again, and he'd gone out to meet some friends. They'd given him something to snort. He thought it was ketamine, but it was actually ecstasy, and by the time he got home he was balancing on the edge of an overdose. He was vomiting and vomiting, stumbling up the fire escape and into his bed. He stepped onto an open box of legos, thus the limp. His nose bled as he seized in his sleep, blood splattering the ceiling, thus the red crust under his nostrils.

I gave him a hug, avoiding the dried throw-up. I bought him a green juice from Starbucks for \$5.50, probably more than I could afford. "Drink this." I said, sliding the bottle across the desk in our French midterm that afternoon. "It'll cure you. I promise."

"Thanks." He looked at me as I tried not to cry. "Hey, I love you. Thank you." He paused, worked a gold ring off his finger. "I didn't know we were exchanging presents, but here. Take this." he said, slipping it into my backpack.

"Don't do that again," I said.

"I'll try," he said, and that was all.

The rest of the year decayed from there, in a series of his parents' desperate curfews and piss tests. Eventually, his parents cut him off, and he begged me

for money. He was in nicotine withdrawal, he said, and it wasn't fair of them to make him go cold turkey. I gave him a hundred bucks. I didn't know what else to do.

In March, he overdosed properly for the first time. It was Vicodin, apparently, laced with fentanyl. He never used to do pills, said they scared him. They were too clean, too official, all bone and no blood. But he'd started that winter, swallowing them with cheap booze and feeling the world go quiet around him. I think it reminded him of the water—how it swallowed him up, blurred all the sound and colors around him, and how endless it seemed, the ocean floor shrouded with dark.

A friendly drug dealer had given them to him free. A gift. When his mother called 911, he tried to hit her. When the paramedics came, he tried to hit them too. He woke up handcuffed to the hospital bed.

I didn't even get to see him before his parents sent him away to California to live with his grandparents, to be, officially, no longer their problem. I didn't even get to say goodbye.

\* \* \*

By the time I was twenty-one, I was a junior at Yale. I had lost touch with Sam, after he'd stopped replying to my messages halfway through our senior year of high school and I stopped trying halfway through our freshman year of college. At Yale, I helped run the litmag, I had a boyfriend, I had my shit together. I wore cashmere sweaters with no bra, I knew the difference between assonance and consonance, I went to parties hosted by half-secret societies and could take vodka shots without changing my expression.

I wore Sam's ring on my thumb but when people asked I told them it belonged to my grandfather. It was one last secret I could keep with Sam, one last in-joke. My grandfather had been a mechanic and died when my mom was seven years old, his red Jeep veering off the snow-covered roads on the way to a hunting trip. My family didn't collect heirlooms, rings or otherwise. We collected coupons.

Sam called me one night in the middle of winter. He was in New Haven. He needed a place to stay. He wanted to know if our high-school promise of giving each other a place to crash still stood. I mumbled yes into my phone and grabbed my coat. I laughed into the microphone. "Yes, of course you can crash here, we just have to sneak you into my apartment."

I lived in student housing off campus and felt like a real adult, my tiny apartment filled with posters of famous paintings and packets of instant noodles. My roommate had gone home halfway through the semester because of a nervous breakdown and so he slept on her bed, underneath the Polaroid pictures of her

friends that she never bothered to take down. He rolled us a joint and then another and another and another, laughing when I coughed.

“You’ve gone soft,” he said, pushing his shoulder against mine.

I closed my eyes, feeling the red hot pulse of my eyelids, listening to my breath go in and out. I hadn’t smoked in forever and had forgotten what it felt like, how it made you remember your body. Breathing slowly, I felt the heat radiate from my skin and escape into the winter air. “I’ve always been soft, remember.”

“Yeah, that’s true. You always were.”

He wouldn’t tell me what had happened since we’d last talked, although he apologized over and over for not answering my calls. I let it go that night. Instead, I told him everything that had happened to me. I showed him pictures of my boyfriend and pieces I’d gotten published. He called me brilliant. He told me he was proud of me.

Over the next few weeks, he wouldn’t tell me much more of anything, either where he’d been or what his plans were. We settled into a routine. In the mornings, I’d leave for class and he’d still be asleep. I’d come back at night and we’d eat dinner together, usually after I stole something for him from the cafeteria. Some nights, he’d just eat ramen or not eat at all, chain smoking till my room smelled more like tobacco than it did like me. At night he’d go out, I’m not sure where. He’d come back in the early morning exhausted and stumbling into the room, his pupils huge.

I slowly pieced together what had happened. The move to California hadn’t straightened him out the way his parents hoped it would. When he turned twenty, his dad got sick of his living in their house buying drugs off his money. He cut Sam off until he pulled it together. But he didn’t. Not after the second overdose or the third. Before Sam ended up in New Haven, he’d been bouncing from friend’s house to friend’s house for a year, living in vacation homes and shitty apartments and on cardboard boxes on street corners. Sam had enough rich friends left to tag along on their plane rides and train tickets, and enough desperation to hitchhike huge swathes of the country, and so he ended up here, in New Haven, after exhausting all his other options.

Sam stayed with me for a month and a half before his dad called me in the middle of my history lecture. I rushed to the hallway and picked up.

“I want to thank you for,” he cleared his throat, “for giving Sam a place to stay.”

I leaned against the wall. “Of course. I’d do anything for him.”

“Yes. And it’s so wonderful he has someone like you. Such a good influence. But you know, obviously, that he needs to come home. We’re putting him in rehab.”

“I don’t think he’ll want to go.” When he’d first come to stay with me, I’d promised him he could trust me. At the time, his reasons for avoiding rehab

seemed to make a certain kind of sense: he wanted to figure things out by himself, he was doing better, it was just an excuse for his parents to control him again. But one by one, those reasons had started to decay, replaced with the strange monotony of our days—him stumbling in every night, and me trying my best to keep him alive.

“Then don’t tell him I’m coming. I’ll be there Monday.” There was a pause, the phone static filling our ears, our mouths.

“You know,” he said, “I’d be happy to reimburse you for the rent and utilities Sam cost you. Plus more for the inconvenience. I can give you the cheque Monday, once Sam is safe in my hands.”

I sunk down to the floor of the hallway, holding my knees close to me. The telephone static buzzed quietly, waiting for me to speak. “Yes. Thank you. That sounds good. I’ll see you then. Thank you.”

“We can email to discuss logistics?”

“Yes. Of course. Yes.”

\* \* \*

After Sam left for rehab he didn’t contact me again. I know he felt like I had betrayed him. Maybe I had. I don’t know. I just kept on living. I married my boyfriend the summer we graduated and we divorced three years later, when we were twenty-five. I worked at a copy-editing agency days and a restaurant waitressing two nights a week. I had dental insurance and paid sick leave, though not much of it. I wasn’t unhappy.

Five years after Sam first came to stay with me, I got a voicemail from a number I didn’t recognize. It was Sam’s dad, telling me to come to New York. Sam had died a week earlier, having taken a lethal dose of sleeping pills. It was his fourth overdose. At this point, I don’t think I believed he could die. He’d survived so long doing the un-survivable, and so it wasn’t hard to imagine that the sleeping pills hadn’t been intentional. He might have just thought he could tolerate things other people couldn’t.

I got time off work and took a train to New York five days later for the funeral. It was in a huge gothic church with a closed casket. No one really talked to me, except for his family, who waved me over. Looking at Sam’s father’s face, it was hard to speak. I hadn’t seen him since he’d picked Sam up for rehab. He’d stood calm and polished in the center of my tiny apartment while Sam raged around him, yelling and his father then at me. “You fucking bitch,” Sam’d said. “I hope you buy something nice.”

I whispered out my condolences to Sam’s family and went to my seat in the back of my church, where I hugged my knees to my chest the way children do.

It was cold and I was tired, my breath catching and wavering on the edge of my throat. By the time Sam's uncle had started his speech on the sanctity of life, I had grabbed my coat and rushed out, hyperventilating in the cold New York air.

When Sam had been alive, I took comfort in knowing he was out there, breathing and thinking and capable of forgiving me. I could've bumped into him at a coffee shop or in an airport trolley. We'd look older and neater, the slant of our shoulders straightened out, but he'd recognize me. He'd look past me, then double back, call out my name. For a moment or two, we could've talked, our sentences stumbling and bumping into each other. I could've apologized.

There was a YMCA near the hotel and a faded blue swimsuit in the trunk of my car. I grabbed it on the way out and changed in my hotel room, rubbing my hands over the goosebumps on my legs.

I slipped into the pool and began to swim. The water was blue and mute, and all around me chlorine echoed into more chlorine. I guess I finally understood the appeal.

I held my breath for as long as I could, the burn in my chest filling my body with warmth. I picked up speed as my vision started to fracture into tiny dots, my heartbeat heavy in my throat as I moved closer and closer to the edge of the pool. ■

# When These Arms Fall (After Toni Morrison's *Beloved*)

## SHORT STORY

**Justin Nazario**, Grade 12, Osceola County School for the Arts, Kissimmee, FL.  
Mignon Austin and Brian Capley, *Educators*; Region-at-Large, *Affiliate*. Silver Medal

*What will they do with my songs  
Once I am dead?  
And I have washed off all of  
This lavender soap,  
Bare and bone?  
Scrubbed clean, from head to toe,  
Finally breathing again?  
Why, I'll lean my head on  
Many things before then.  
I'd have a bed in every room.  
A seat at every table.  
And the soap?  
When it's gone, I'll be just skin.*

There are hungry men where the roads don't go. Lots of them. Everywhere, but mainly around the marigolds. Love to pick them, they do, and make dye from the petals they crush beneath dirty nails and into aged hands, carry them back home to their mama and scatter it on a plate. Give what's left to their sister, and she'll make them into rose water, clear the rash on your wrist. Taste a little if the day's right and realize it's no different from the stuff down at Lake. Only the picture on the front and the name "rose" and how much you paid for it.

There are hungry men where the roads don't go and I've seen them. I've seen them all. They swim in the Lake with tucked cocks and no shirt, bracelet, supervision. They ain't Free, though. Never will be. A Free Man's never Free when people call him that. Just a lot of stuff he doesn't wanna talk about. On talking days, however, they'll go on for hours—discussing dope, the quarry, the boys kissing pavement down in Prien. But not *these* Free Men. They were scared of talk and everything that came with it. Scared of binding and matrimony and lethargy so they always kept busy, delivering cakes for Mrs. Puwich, folding clothes for whoever needed clothes folded, running errands for local mothers and daughters. Always busy with a task. Always for the reward afterwards. Sometimes it was money, other times it was the connection or a blanket. Time is repaid with comfort, effort with coins.

And today they're swimming again. Some in the water, some love-making on the patches of grass that surrounded the banks, kissing, rolling over on their backs. Only done it once before now, from behind the veil of shirts, bracelets, supervision. But they ain't Free, though. You can take it all off and still have the shackles around your wrist, bring them with you into the love. *Love*. They whispered it to one another beneath the smoldering sun. *Love*. It ain't easy to reach but it's impossible to grow out of. They would know: they made it here, in the shadow of serviceberry and holly, in the fleshy cover that one provided for the other with the scars as a shield, with the dirty nails as a guide, with teeth made for biting.

Those were the men. The boys were never invited to such activities, instead, sat and wove baskets before they were of age to work. The men decided that and so much more for them. The handful of good ones stuck around and made a name for themselves, out of the same wood they bended at the base and folded between loops like the instructions had them programmed to do. Poked it through their skin like a linen wedge and carried themselves by the handle into brighter light and newer days. The rest stayed behind and latched keys until they went mad or retired.

We only got to know one of them. The Free Men spat him out after deeming him unsuitable for chores, laundry, parading. They hated the quiet ones on talking days. Always took one bite and threw the rest away if it took too long to tell your story.

Jackie built the house that mama had me in. He was 14, then, with white skin and glass and timber stuffed beneath his stocky arms and contained hair that didn't require a brush, but still carried one around. Got in 17 strokes before they brought the carpet, and he retired the brush to his front pocket and went fishing for nails. Did it all in 10 weeks, all by himself.

Mama loved Jackie even before he built the temple. He was always a good kid, kept his hands to himself, stayed where he sat. Didn't have a mama but instead a council of fathers. Never a runaway type of man. Oh yea, mama loved him through and through. And he was good like she promised he was, just not big enough for horseplaying or scrapping down at the baseball field with the other kids. No, Jackie was just fine. Most things about him were just—except his height. After we'd give him some ale and bread from the kitchen, we'd sit and talk with him between orders from Mrs. Puwich. Our house sat between her shop and the district they served, and Jackie spent most of the day walking to and fro. The first few days, he was always out of breath, talking between heaves and gasps, laying down on his back. But when he thought about fighting, he was overwhelmed with it, consumed by it, talking between laps around the house.

"Tray-ning." He'd gasp out.

"Ain't no way you're fighting down there, Jackie. Get back up here and finish your ale!" Mama called out, swatting a mosquito. "I'm sure Mrs. Puwich has another assignment for you before the day's up."

Jackie shook his head.

"Did 'em all this morning." He chugged the remaining ale. I watched him gulp down each drop, his budding apple rhythmically dancing as to allow the elixir into his bosom.

"Well, get going anyway. Me and Fiora have to catch afternoon service." Mama turned to me with a nod. I mirrored her and looked at Jackie.

"Mrs. Puwich wanted me back by three anyway. I'll get going now."

Mama's eyes grew for a moment. Above the trees, she saw the gray smoke from the bakery flood the sky overhead.

"Better hurry unless Mrs. Puwich's in a good mood today." She shooed him away with the back of her wrist.

"Why wouldn't she be? She loves her boys and we love her back." Jackie stepped off the porch as he slid another loaf of bread from the platter into his back pocket, sinking beneath the setting sun and starting down the street. Mama looked sullenly down at her hands. Veins ran up and down her shriveled arms as they congregated in her palms, leaning on the bed of her pale skin like a translucent blanket, interactive and moveable at the surface. Folds and ripples in the fleshy waves gathered on the bending parts of her body, the things she had used all her life: her hands, cheeks, legs.

As Jackie walked away, her eyes sunk below the stone steps and into the dirt below. Mrs. Puwich's husband was down there, somewhere, amongst a sea of brown and darkness. She wasn't the same after he passed, and no one blamed her for it. Cried as she whisked flour and milk and squashed it onto a

tray, leaned against the furnace as she weakly shut the door, envied the flame as it artfully incinerated the balls of dough and sugar. Her arms, adorned with tattoos and fat that hung slightly off her elbows, had lost their desire to lift and carry the pastries. On occasion, Mrs. Puwich would retire to her bed and call off business for the day, apt with an empty purse but an overflowing mind. Took her temper out on the dog if weeping beside the window had failed in providing catharsis.

One day, in the summer before my sixth birthday, the sheriff went to Mrs. Puwich's apartment due to a noise complaint and left with the corpse of her deceased pup. Something awoke in her that day. The cakes became bitter and tasted of an agrarian life, one far and away from the kitchen, away from a dusty apartment that sat above the struggling business. The milk became spoiled and was used nonetheless. No one bothered to complain, simply tasted the bereavement beneath the crust and wallowed in the crumbs that followed it to the trash.

She directed her gaze from the Earth to Jackie, skipping down the road. Her hands silently came together in prayer as the afternoon sun continued to beat.

\* \* \*

The next day, Jackie didn't come knocking. He didn't come around the side of the house, out of breath, head between his thighs as sweat pulsed onto the ground. He didn't come with a plastic bag tied at its lip and collar, the scent arriving just as he would.

We waited and waited until the gnats buzzed into our mouths and took possession of the bread sitting on the porcelain platter. We waited until we were tired of sitting. We went to bed when the sun had set and the smoke from the bakery was the same color as the sky.

That night, we fell asleep to the clanking of golden chains down the road. ■

# O Costco! My Costco!

## HUMOR

**Vivian Fan**, Grade 9, White Station High School, Memphis, TN. James Baker, *Educator*; Middle Tennessee Writing Project, *Affiliate*. Gold Medal, **American Voices Medal**

*Walt Whitman had Lincoln; I have Costco*

O Costco! My Costco! The shopping trip is done  
The cart has weather'd every aisle, the TP rolls are won,  
The checkout nears, the cashier I hear, the lines are shortening,  
While follow eyes the steady wheels, the carrier trim and daring;  
But O samples! samples!

O you tiny plastic cups,  
Where on a cracker cream cheese lies,  
Shall I snatch you up?

O samples! Samples! I will not let you tempt me so,  
To eat means to lower my mask, so onwards I must go,  
And the shopping cart rolls on, and I begin reminiscing,  
Of times before and all the morsels that I would be tasting;  
O Costco! My Costco!

Things have changed quite a bit.  
Unlike others, you adapted.  
Thank you for doing it.

O Costco! My Costco! I love your mask mandate so  
(Once a man pull'd down his mask to breathe fresh air in, though)

Your spacious self and warehouse shelves are so awe inspiring  
I will still feel safe even if somebody is respiring  
Bandanas and balaclavas!

Face coverings abound

Costco, I only bought from you  
During the lockdown

O Costco! My Costco! Safe haven of surplus  
Bulk seaweed and spring rolls; where else can I find this much stuff?  
A great discount I have spotted and I can't stop myself from buying  
The food looks great; never mind that it will soon be expiring  
Open freezer! Open fridge!

Accept my offerings

I play a game of Tetris  
To stack all my food in

O Costco! My Costco! My hallway's decor you provide  
Life imitates art; cans upon cans fill my house's inside  
Now, the only things that matter are the ones that will be lasting  
Though, when I smell the canned green beans, I think of fasting  
O preservatives!

Full of malicious power

Like this pandemic, you have cut  
My lifespan by hours

O Costco! My Costco! Weekly is my return;  
Kroger and Walmart I forsake, but you I never spurn!  
For you, a gold star membership, for you the stores a-crowding  
For you they call, the panicked mass, their desp'rate faces turning  
Here Costco! dear franchise!

Have all my Saturdays!

I am a loyal customer  
To my friends, you I praise

O Costco! My Costco! Every royal needs a court  
A food court, that is, with cuisine so cheap others fall short  
Beneath peppermint parasols your subjects were sitting  
Recovering from an oily meal, and burps emitting

But alas! Corona!

Inhalation is unsafe

Pizza eaten in the car

Is now the only way

The catches of the day are born into the trunk of the car

Treasures: hand sanitizer and masks, more precious than stars

The cart is return'd safe and sound, its voyage closed and done

From shopping trip the victor ship comes in with objects won

Exult O shoppers and honk O horns!

A parking space is now vacant

Until next week, then, Costco!

For you, I will be patient. ■

# The Objects' Demands

## HUMOR

**Sammy Barron**, Grade 8, Emery Weiner School, Houston, TX. Elaine Lupovitch, *Educator*; Harris County Department of Education, *Affiliate*. Gold Medal

In a house on a hill, there lived a rich family, their money inconceivable to men  
Yet they had the same objects that you and I do, like paper and pencils and pens  
But they do not use the objects the same way that you and I would do  
And just as the rich kids have their demands, the objects have their demands too

"Please don't fold me into tiny airplanes, you crush my bones doing so  
And please don't use me to jam the printer, it makes the printer not go  
And please don't use just one side of me, however many papers you've got  
But what I want most of all," Paper demands, "is for your paper abuse to stop."

"Please don't use me to hurt your siblings, I know you can pay the bills but still  
And please don't open me just for fun, it makes my staples spill  
And please don't waste my staples and make them hit the floor with a hard *plop*  
But what I want most of all," Stapler demands, "is for your stapler abuse to stop."

"Please don't snap me violently in half, my wood is only so tough  
And please don't shove me in the sharpener for too long, my life's already  
so rough  
And please don't hold me by the ends for your siblings to gracelessly chop  
But what I want most of all," Pencil demands, "is for your pencil abuse to stop."

“Please don’t forget to wash me out, my inside gets gross when you do  
And please don’t use the pieces of me to put into your siblings’ shoes  
And please don’t let me fall on the ground, I do not wish to be dropped  
But what I want most of all,” Glass demands, “is for your glass abuse to stop.”

“Please don’t run my ink all over, you drain my life every time  
And please don’t click my top all day, your teachers think it’s out of line  
And please don’t take me apart all the time, you churn my spring into a knot  
But what I want most of all,” Pen demands, “is for your pen abuse to stop.”

“Please don’t slide me across the paper, I’m meant to snip, not to swipe  
And please don’t use me to cut your hair, you and your parents will be bound  
to fight  
And please don’t use me to hurt anyone, you’re likely to get arrested by cops  
But what I want most of all,” Scissors demands, “is for your scissors abuse  
to stop.”

“Please don’t walk around with me, you walk into walls when doing so  
And please don’t drive while texting, if you do, jail is where you’ll go  
And please don’t browse the internet, while it seems like it’s an innocent place,  
it’s not  
But what I want most of all,” Phone demands, “is for your phone abuse  
to stop.”

“Please don’t binge watch thousands of episodes, when you do you kill my  
led lights  
And please don’t use me late at night, your neighbors will complain that I’m  
too bright  
And please don’t rage and throw the controller at me, it hurts me a lot when  
I drop  
But what I want most of all,” Television demands, “is for your television abuse  
to stop.”

“Please don’t take selfies with me, just point the phone at your face  
And please don’t splash water on me, you’re not putting the water in the  
right place  
And please don’t drop me on the ground and clean me up with your dirty mop  
But what I want most of all,” Mirror demands, “is for your mirror abuse  
to stop.”

“We objects have made our demands, oh family that abuses us so,  
We demand that you stop mistreating us, or else we demand that you go  
We have made our point of what we want, now the decision is up to you  
Do you agree to treat us with dignity or will you disregard our demands too?”

The family thought about this for a while, wondering what to do,  
They thought it was weird that a group of objects were asking them to choose  
And they chose to treat the objects with more respect than before  
And they all lived happily ever after because I can’t rhyme anymore. ■

# An Educator's Guide to *Best Teen Writing 2021*

Prepared by the National Writing Project

Use the works of these National Medalist teen writers to inspire discussion and guide writing exercises with students.

## 1. Short Story

The relationship between setting and mood—*35 minutes*

**Goal:** Students explain how authors establish mood through details of setting (time and place).

**Activity:** Choose a story for review that contains many evocative details of setting (time, place, weather, etc.). Ask students to read with a highlighter, making note of the plot elements. List on the board.

**Discuss:** What would it feel like to be here? Why do you think so? Choose a “favorite element.” How did that particular detail add to your feeling about the place?

**Revising for mood:** Students choose a story they are working on, or a story from *The Best Teen Writing*. Add details of setting to enhance the mood being conveyed. Share with a partner for response.

## 2. Short Story

Writing with focus on characterizing the narrative—*35 minutes*

**Goal:** Students restructure a narrative with another narrator, creating the same story with a different perspective.

**Activity:** Ask students to take on the voice of one of the other characters and tell the story from that point of view, filling in blanks that the original narrator left open. Challenge students to use important characterizing details in the reading to give color to their entries.

## 3. Poetry

Writing with focus on form—*30 minutes*

**Goal:** Students write using different structural techniques.

**Activity:** Have students write two poems on one topic of their choosing. Begin with a prose poem, in which they write freely on that topic; then have them write another poem on the same topic with a focus on line breaks to emphasize changes in rhythm or highlight specific phrases. Discuss the differences after sharing the results.

#### 4. **Personal Essay & Memoir**

Writing with a focus on structure and pacing—45 minutes

**Goal:** Students write an organized and coherent memoir imitating the format of a *Best Teen Writing* piece.

**Activity:** Select a Personal Essay & Memoir from the anthology to read out loud with your students. Talk about the format in which the memoir is written. Discuss the choices made and how those choices are inherently personal, therefore inherently suited to convey a personal essay.

Ask your students to write their own memoirs modeled after the memoir you have selected. Have the students share their work and discuss choices that each student makes, including how those choices convey something personal to the reader.

#### 5. **Genre-Shifting Exercise**

Blackout Poetry—40 minutes

**Goal:** Students explore form's relationship to function by distilling the language in a single piece of prose into a piece of poetry.

**Activity:** Have the students choose a page of prose in *Best Teen Writing*. Students then scan the page for words that are interesting and lightly circle or underline those words with a pen. Next students read the page from top to bottom, looking for more interesting words, or words that might relate to the circled words. They should circle these, too. Finally, students begin to black out all the words on the page that they aren't using, in a sense "whittling away" the words that aren't part of the poem they've found within the text.

**Educators:** Continue the discussion! Explore with your peers even more ways in which *Best Teen Writing 2021* can inspire students in your classroom. Feel free to share new ideas about how to use *Best Teen Writing* by sending your ideas to [programs@nwp.org](mailto:programs@nwp.org).

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Editorial Cartoon	Poetry
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