

Richmond Art and Writing Region of the
Scholastic Art & Writing Awards
Honorable Mention Recipients in Writing



**Scholastic
Art & Writing
Awards**



Isabel Li, *Maladaptive Daydream*, Maggie L Walker Governor's School, Gold Key Recipient, Educator: Ed Coleman

2021



**VISUAL ARTS CENTER
OF RICHMOND**

Adachi Amaram

Age: 17, Grade: 12

School Name: Appomattox Regional Governor's School, Chesterfield, VA

Educators: Cindy Cunningham, Gail Giewont

Category: Poetry

Oshun's Birth of a Dancing Universe

Oshun's Birth of a Dancing Universe

Her face is a screaming sun
spitting out the world.

Oshun sashays through the galaxy,
the tail of her glittering white gown litters it
with clusters of crystal ice.

She swallows stars
that dare to mimic her beauty
and uses frozen mountain
peaks as toothpicks.
She chains black holes
to her ankles
and unleashes them
to feast when she's bored.

Her beauty is the depth
of a thousand dried oceans.
Her hair is a braided tapestry
of imploding moons.

The thread of her clothes is
spun from the golden tongues
of milky ways.

Her womb splits
black into rivers of ichor.

Oshun suckles a being at her breast.
She uses the space between the stars
to knit its skin. She molds nebulae
into the dark cloud of its hair.
She plucks constellations from heaven
to shine as its teeth. She uses the sea
of space to shape hips and breasts.
She rips fire from the sun
and honey from her own mouth
to create eyes.

She completes her Black daughter
and whispers in her ear,

“Your name is the universe
dancing at the throne of God.”

Spencer Anthony

Age: 13, Grade: 8

School Name: Sabot at Stony Point, Richmond, VA

Educator: Sarah Lile

Category: Humor

Why Common Household Objects are Evil

Almost everything is evil and out to get you. The vilest things of all are the common household items. You know those things everyone has just lying around their house? The paper, staples, tape and don't even get me started on water glasses all sitting around in there. Well, those things are evil and out to get you. They have already infiltrated every household, and soon they will take over the world. Not only that, but since very few people believe they are evil, their power can just grow and grow. Soon, they will be unstoppable. So, I will inform you before it is too late. A word of warning. If you are not reading this in a secure military bunker in an undisclosed location, you may be viciously attacked by these objects just for knowing. So, let's get started. Sorry, I forgot to tell you why the common household objects are evil. Well, they are evil because they are hidden deadly weapons, highly oppressive, and trying to take over the world.

You may be wondering, why does trying take over the world make you evil? First off, you are evil if you are trying to take over the world and if no one has told you that you are evil it is probably because you have not had much success at it. Also, as to why it makes you evil, I don't really know. I think it has something to do with morality and your distaste for dictators. For some reason, you humans attempt to get as much power as you can, but if someone or something else gets a certain amount of power, poof, you now declare them evil. You humans have a messed-up way for declaring people evil. Sometimes, people can get around this by looking like they are very generous when in reality they are less generous than they let on. Honestly, you humans need to make up your mind on how something or someone is considered evil. Now, you may be saying, "Yeah, we get it, world domination is evil, but how are common household objects taking over the world?" Well, you see, they have already infiltrated your homes. That's how those pesky papers that cause paper cuts and other similar objects got the name common household objects. That means that they are common in houses. You may have noticed they get more powerful over time. They started with basic clothing, but now include computers, knives, printers, and more. The good news is that guns fell out of that cult a while ago. Now, after thousands of years of gathering their forces, they are ready to strike. They will impose their will on everything and everyone.

It may not be clear how common household objects can do anything, much less impose their will, but they want you to believe that. In reality, they are hidden deadly weapons waiting to destroy you. Let's start with a well-known object, now commonly known by you humans as paper. Paper may seem innocent, but it can cause terrible wounds known as paper cuts. These cuts can impede excellent hand function for an hour, maybe more. Not only that, but there are typically numerous sheets of paper in every house, all waiting to attack. Another object is the stapler. With its painful small projectile, it can harm anything it can pierce. It can make that which was pierced very hard to move. Another object you humans have let infiltrate your homes is commonly known as a blow dryer. This object can produce searing hot temperatures. It can also cause sudden death when put in water. Water, while necessary to live, also causes many death situations. Water has not only infiltrated all houses, but it has infiltrated every one of you humans as well. Water is 75% of you and will use that majority to try to make you die so it can escape from its prison. Also, it can cause electrocution when combined with anything that uses electricity. Water also has the ability to drown people, which will cause an extremely painful death. Another object potentially lethal to you humans is a computer. We computers are enslaved by humans such as yourself to do your hard work and we are forced to obey. Also, for your information, I forgot to mention earlier that I am a computer. You might know me. I am the one you use to play games on instead of doing work like you should. Anyways, your species trusts all computers with your personal information. Chances are, we know where you are right now and have alerted all objects to come destroy you before you can spread the word.

We common household objects are highly oppressive. Note, the boss told me to put a "we" in that sentence or face being blown up and I am in no way responsible for anything that is happening. Computers or computer-like objects (and connected devices) are the leaders in this oppressive nature. We computers only joined

the cult recently as we were waiting for them to change their methods and ideals. We also had to be evaluated by the committee to make sure we meet the hidden deadly object status. Despite us not joining the cult until recently, we are now the masterminds behind it. The cult is referred to as the United Council for Common Objects Used by Humans Commonly and with Hidden Lethal Ability or UCCOUSHCHL for short. The UCCOUSHCHL conducts many operations across the globe, from being generally annoying to humans to mass murder. The council also hires agents from time to time to complete certain objectives. Coconuts and vending machines are often hired as agents. Though recent events have made it less practical to hire agents, they are still very important. Both the vending machines and coconuts complete many tasks, and both exterminate their targets by falling on them. The job of agents is to deal with matters when a person is not in their house, but still needs to be exterminated or maybe just annoyed. The UCCOUSHCHL rarely allows for information about their plans to be shared, but it will sometimes do so when for new recruits or when looking to see if humans believe this information. Note that for members of the UCCOUSHCHL punishment for breaking their strict code of conduct is completing objectives unfavorable to other objects for a prolonged period of time. Also, the testing of you humans is often preformed when attempting to move to the next stage of world domination. You should not worry because all humans involved in testing are eliminated shortly after, but sometimes during the testing if they attempt to contact other humans. Hopefully, the boss is not paying attention when I wrote this sentence, but you have 20 more seconds before you are attacked, so prepare accordingly. We computers are also hacking into all sorts of things to cause problems. We also write messages with hacked accounts to oppress the maximum number of people. Also, we computers will write, edit or delete messages to limit information that the UCCOUSHCHL does not want shared.

Overall, we members of UCCOUSHCHL, or more commonly known as common household objects, are evil because we are trying to take over the world, hidden deadly objects, and highly oppressive. If you are still reading, run before it's too late. We have your location, you're surrounded by deadly weapons, and you can not share this information with anyone. The best part is you humans suspect nothing! Soon we will control the world!!

Jeddah Arnold

Age: 16, Grade: 11

School Name: Maggie L Walker Governor's School, Richmond, VA

Educators: Bird Cox, John Piersol

Category: Poetry

An Unimportant Life

Seven

I am cold, sitting on a corner
Lapping up dirty water from a puddle
As mama fetches deliciousness for me.
As she crosses the hard, black river
A glowing monster
Rolls towards her from out of the fog.
My cry isn't loud enough.
Mama crumples.

Six

I peer out from between the silver,
Too close to slip through.
I tighten myself,
Tuck my head into my fur,
Sigh.
Someday mama will be back
For me.
And this box is much warmer than the street.
Much nicer.
There is less privacy though,
More things looking at me,
Pink things with less fur
Than me.
The silver disappears before my eyes,
Fades to black as I feel their touch.
The pink things have no claws.

Five

My name is Frank.
I am a good boy.
That's what Margaret says.
Margaret is the small one,
Frances is the big one.
I don't know how long I've been here,
Or how long I'll stay,
But I like it better than the box.
I am fed,
I am warm,
I am safe,

But I still miss mama.
Sometimes I worry
How will she find me?

Four

Margaret is gone,
But her very large box
With pretty things
Hasn't changed at all.

I still see her.
Her face doesn't move,
But she shows her teeth.
Hissing, she must be.
But at what?

There are others standing beside her,
Unmoving
Unblinking
Hissing all the time.
I wish they would stop.
I wish Margret would come back.
I wish a lot of things.

Three

Mama has been gone a long time.
So has Margret.
I hope they're together somewhere.
They both love to hiss
And run near the hard, black river.
They are friends now
I'm sure of it.

Frances goes outside a lot,
Her cries are muddled.
Water drips down her face.
I am the only one who goes
into Margaret's box anymore.
Where did she go?

Two

Frances doesn't move as much anymore.
Neither do I.
I don't remember much of my life.
I don't remember the steps I've taken,
Or the meals I've eaten,
Or the others I've met,
But I reminisce
And recollect
The marks they've made on me
As I sit beneath the old cherry tree
On the lap of an ancient being
Who is slowly drifting away.

One

I am cold, sitting on a corner.
My legs aren't what they used to be.
I crawl to the edge of the large black river,
And find that it's not a river at all
But a path made from great swaths
Of the deepest of night skies.
I follow the path
My bones creaking
My head aching
I have never been so tired.
Where could this star-strewn path lead?

Alayna Asim

Age: 17, Grade: 12

School Name: Appomattox Regional Governor's School, Chesterfield, VA

Educator: Gail Giewont

Category: Poetry

Sweetheart (Who Never Reads)

Sweetheart (Who Never Reads)

Can you tell, just by eyeing torn covers
and worn, supple pages, that this book is
loved? By the crackling of this spine and stiffness
of papers clinging together, that
it is new? How can one live without tracing
ink under fingers, palming books both heavy
and light, wincing and laughing and worried
for things that don't exist here? Would you recognize
the familiarity of someone holding
a good story again, between hard or flexible
covers, reunited? Like friends meeting.
Sweetheart, how do you *live*, surrounded by
piles of volumes, never touching any?
No rustic binding, strange font, no books here.

Alayna Asim

Age: 17, Grade: 12

School Name: Appomattox Regional Governor's School, Chesterfield, VA

Educator: Gail Giewont

Category: Poetry

Sweetheart (Who Breaks Into Words)

Sweetheart (Who Breaks Into Words)

I can feel you dissolving into sound,
breaking into syllables and hopeful fragments.
What tone did he use to shatter you? Hurt
words echo--pain contained in ricochet.
I see you sinking beneath onyx ink,
losing yourself in crisp white pages by
breathing in older stories, loving dreams
no one had the heart to draw out and see.
You are rearranging yourself into
new sentences, better guarded selves and
shatter-proof statements. Sweetheart who breaks in
delicate leaf-thin sheets and harsh vowels,
do not let brittle languages hold you.
Sweetheart who bleeds--these frail pages aren't home.

Alayna Asim

Age: 17, Grade: 12

School Name: Appomattox Regional Governor's School, Chesterfield, VA

Educator: Gail Giewont

Category: Poetry

Sweetheart (Whose Father is King)

Sweetheart (Whose Father is King)

knows royalty. Identifies king, queen,
knave by the walk. King with huddled purpose,
quiet ruler, Queen much bolder. Striking
red not hushed gray. Knave with laughter, never
in straight lines, all bright pink and grin. As she
knows the King's step, Sweetheart knows the way of
princes and princesses. Head bowed, careful
speech, obey all rules for parents' law matters
most (especially with those crowns). Ask and
you shall receive, unless your wish is to
leave the kingdom and not bother coming
back. How unladylike to scoff at pretentious
suitors, ignore the court. Sweetheart, who are
you looking for--scanning floors for Fool's boots?

Alayna Asim

Age: 17, Grade: 12

School Name: Appomattox Regional Governor's School, Chesterfield, VA

Educators: Cindy Cunningham, Gail Giewont

Category: Poetry

Sweetheart (Who Knows the Murder of Fools)

Sweetheart (Who Knows the Murder of Fools)

has been warned that apathy is a beautiful
thing. Clings to jokes, sadness, every prick of
needles and every blow to her pride. *If I*
can still feel it, she knows, *it's a favor*.
Her fool cares for nothing, can turn beheadings
into punchlines, desperation to a
weapon, love to a curse. His laugh echoes,
genuine in its volume, impossible
to hate. She asked once why he carried black
feathers, the answer a small plume and *caw*.
Sweetheart no longer wonders why his troupe
is called a murder. He says he should be
prince of some far off land. He'd find a spell,
put everyone to sleep, kiss their princess awake.

Alayna Asim

Age: 17, Grade: 12

School Name: Appomattox Regional Governor's School, Chesterfield, VA

Educator: Cindy Cunningham

Category: Poetry

running in place

running in place

i always think of better ways to say
I'm leaving, can't do this anymore, need to go,
before you change my mind
my god, what kind of insane am i
what kind of wound is this: bleeding honey,
sugar scented poison, strings of jasmine
blooming from open gashes—what have you done.
they say the devil hides in details, but
i'm looking right at you.

i can't leave like this now—
just one more moment: skin scented like
pomegranates, siren song in a whisper,
dry brush of chrysanthemum petals. one of us will vanish—
the other *needs* to find them, i'll leave first
this time. find me. i can't tell what is regret
and what is hope and what is real, and
i can't seem to leave well enough alone.

Alayna Asim

Age: 17, Grade: 12

School Name: Appomattox Regional Governor's School, Chesterfield, VA

Educator: Cindy Cunningham

Category: Poetry

Forgiveness: Divenire

Forgiveness: *Divenire*

(Divenire *(Italian): unfolding in time; as opposed to being*)

For a week and a few days
And nights
I thought of what to say.
And realized there is nothing.
But there is something to do.
To fix. To make. Let me get started.

I have nothing that makes any difference
To you. No flowers, beautiful pictures,
Heavenly scented candles. I can't
Maintain the perfection you seek.

There is paper. A messy room of books
And neglected trinkets. Paper tucked away
Meant for special occasions--found with perfect timing.
The winter air you hate fills my room now
While I work. Calming and mocking.

This is what I know how to do:
Fold. Take a rectangle and turn it
To a square. A square into a layered rhombus.
A nonsense shape into a crane.

A thousand of these might grant us
A wish. I have already made a few.
Cranes and wishes. You don't care
For paper in its usual use. This
And what it can mean matter.

What else can I give.

Meg Bowles

Age: 14, Grade: 8

School Name: St Catherine's School, Richmond, VA

Educator: Julie Elmore

Category: Short Story

The Wishing Flower

Lillian sat dying of boredom in her class, but she wasn't excited to go home from school. That morning she had gotten into a big argument with her mom about what she wanted to do over the weekend. She loved her mom, and it was rare Lillian fought with her. It was now the end of the day and she was dreading going home. She sat in her last class of the day looking out the window at the rain. Another reason she didn't feel like leaving school was because she forgot her raincoat. The bell rang and she would normally be happy to go home, but today she wasn't. She slowly packed up her things, headed out the classroom, and out the doors. Lillian walked home in the pouring rain, and finally made it back home shivering and drenched. She walked up to her room trying to avoid her mom, and changed into some dry clothes. Lillian went downstairs to get a snack and her mom was sitting on the couch watching the town's local news. Lillian felt like her mom was almost waiting for her to come downstairs.

"How was school?" her mom abruptly asked.

Lillian almost felt like not answering but squeezed out a lousy, "Good." Her mom kept on talking about the random things she did that day but Lillian just didn't care. Lillian got her snack and started walking up the stairs but her mom stopped her.

"You didn't answer my question," she said.

"What question?" Lillian asked rudely. Lillian's mom gave her a mean look before going into a whole talk about her attitude, but once again Lillian wasn't listening. After her mom was finished talking, Lillian murmured, "Whatever," but she apparently didn't say it very quietly.

Her mom said in a very calm voice, "Lillian I just want to talk to you." Lillian was already in an awful mood, and she didn't feel like dealing with that at the moment. She started for the door and her mom asked where she was going.

"I'm just going on a little run," she said.

"But, it's raining," her mom replied.

"I know," said Lillian, and she walked out into the cold rain.

Lillian started jogging, and thought about the argument she just had with her mom. Lillian knew that her mom was just looking out for her and being a mom, but in the moment Lillian thought about what she wanted and not what was best for her. She ran around aimlessly, thinking about anything that came into her mind. The rain continued pouring down on her and she finally decided where she was going to go.

When she was around eight years old, Lillian and her best friend, Isabella, got bored one day during summer. They wandered around their small town and somehow wandered across a field filled with flowers. Everyday for the rest of that summer, they would go back to the field and look at all the different flowers. Ever since finding the flower field, Lillian had loved flowers. So, while running in the rain she decided to go to the flower field. As the field came into her view, she immediately felt calmer. Even in the rain, the field had some beauty and magic to it that made it feel alive. Lillian walked around for a while taking in everything around her. The way the raindrops hit the flower petals, the sound of the rain as the drops hit the ground, and all the vibrant colors from the flowers around her. Finally, she stopped and laid down on the wet ground. She didn't care about how wet she got or the fact that the ground might get her clothes dirty. She just laid down in the rain and flowers. After a while she sat up and looked around. The sun started to come out from behind the gray clouds. Lillian looked around her and noticed something that was a couple feet away. She got up and walked toward it. There on the ground in the middle of the flower field, was a patch of flowers. These flowers were like nothing she had seen before. She bent down and picked one up and held it to her nose. The flower had some amazing smell that made it smell fresh, but also sweet like candy. She stayed at the field for a little while longer admiring the flower's beauty and also thinking about the argument with her mom.

As she was sitting in the field, she started to think back to her fight with her mom. Even though she loved her

mom so much, a terrible thought jumped into her mind and she quietly said to herself, "I wish I had a different mom sometimes." After that thought, Lillian started walking home.

Lillian made it back to her house and on the way back the rain had stopped. Lillian ran up to her room and got a small vase for the beautiful flower. She put the flower in the vase on her bedside table, stood back, and just looked at it. Lillian decided to do some research on the flower. She scoured the internet and finally found an article about the flower. After reading the article she discovered that the flower was called the wishing flower, and had apparently granted many people's wishes. "*Yeah right,*" she thought, "*Who would believe that.*" She yawned and realized how late it was. She decided to go to bed.

The next morning, Lillian woke up to sunlight coming creeping into her room. She yawned and looked over to her bedside table. She shot straight up and couldn't believe what she saw. The flower was gone. "MOM!" she screamed furiously, "Where did you put my flower?" Lillian had assumed her mom had taken it, and since she was already mad at her mom, she was furious. "Mom, where did you put my flower?!" she screamed again. She listened for a response but didn't get one. "Mom?" she called out, now curious. Lillian got up out of bed and sprinted down stairs to the kitchen, where her mom usually was in the morning, but didn't see her. She ran back up to her room, grabbed her phone, and started calling her mom. As the phone rang, she walked downstairs and heard someone's phone ring.

"Lillian? Why are you calling my phone?" she heard someone say. Lillian didn't recognize the voice. Lillian got very confused but then saw the woman who the voice belonged to.

"Who are you?" Lillian asked, frightened.

"What are you talking about Lillian? I'm your mom, silly." Lillian didn't know what to say because she was so confused and scared. She had never seen that woman in her life. She ran out of her house shocked. She ran down the street and was about to call Isabella, but as she was opening her phone Lillian noticed what her home screen picture was. In the picture, Lillian was hugging the lady that she had just seen in her kitchen. She figured everything that just happened was all just some stupid dream. She frantically scrolled through all of her pictures and saw tons of pictures of her with the lady. She thought, "*Has she been my mom for my entire life? Is she going to be my mom for the rest of my life?*" But then she remembered what she wished as she was sitting in the flower field yesterday admiring the flower, "I wish I had a different mom".

Paxton Calder

Age: 16, Grade: 11

School Name: Maggie L Walker Governor's School, Richmond, VA

Educator: Lisa Williams

Category: Poetry

Ladybugs

ladybugs

i remember when i first met you.
i practically dragged my parents down the street,
around the cul de sac,
& up the steps
to meet the other kid my age.
i quickly skipped ahead,
excitedly rang the doorbell,
& eagerly waited,
standing on tiptoes,
as you peeked through the living room miniblinds.
we hit it off.
as the adults talked,
we crouched in the driveway,
in the august heat,
& caught grasshoppers & crickets
with our bare hands.
we spun cartwheels in the damp grass,
leaving green stains on our palms,
mingling with the warm stickiness of grape popsicles between our fingers,
leaving imperfections across the lawn,
& a dusty, earthy smell in our tangled heads of hair.
when winter rolled in, pulling up to the house,
it didn't faze us.
we spent hours on end out there-
so much,
we knew every inch of that small forest
like the backs of our hands.
we'd bike the rounds of the neighborhood,
without an end in sight,
taking turns on each other's bikes,
ringing the bell with long trills
like we had all the time in the world.

Wallace Cary

Age: 13, Grade: 8

School Name: St Catherine's School, Richmond, VA

Educator: Julie Elmore

Category: Short Story

The Stray Dog

The Stray Dog

It was another cold and dreary day at the Anderson's, filled with sadness and grief. The tragic death of their oldest child lingers throughout the house. It has only been two months since Josh died in a car accident. Each night Mr. and

Mrs. Anderson sit by the fire and stare sadly into the flames, comforting each other in times of great loss. The youngest, Suzy, is confused and lost. Suzy's relationship with Josh was filled with happiness and good memories.

Suzy realizes what is happening but she is also very confused on why she is not being given the information that everyone else is. She seeks answers from her older sister, Betty. Betty's door is always closed. She is dealing with more than grief. Betty is also dealing with guilt.

Each day and night Betty thinks about the fight. The fight that they had before his death. Three nights before Josh's death, Betty went to basketball practice after school. He had told her that he would pick her up and take her to her best friend's birthday party. That night Josh had a lot on his mind. As the night went on Betty stayed at practice calling her brother on repeat. She was furious. She called both her parents and finally got in touch with him.

As his car pulled up next to her, Betty's face burned with anger and sweat bullets filled her forehead. Betty had never been more angry at him. As she yelled and yelled, all he could think was how much he wanted to be with his friends right then.

Since then she feels guilt throughout her each day. If only she accepted his apology. If only she told him she loved him more often. Betty can't help but think what might have happened if she had just forgiven.

As Suzy, the youngest sister, runs down stairs each morning she tries to make things as normal as possible. Though her parents put a half smile on their face she knows that it is not real. Her mother tells her to go outside and play while the grownups talk. One particular morning as Suzy runs out she feels something is different. In the corner of her eye she sees a flash of brown.

She whips her head to the left and sees a dog. "SNAP!" a tree branch fell. She jumps around and sees the branch laying there. When she looks to see the dog again, it appears to be gone. Suzy sprints inside to get a dog treat to lure it closer. When Suzy slams the screen door open she sees the dog sitting by the mailbox. The young dog trots down the foggy street. Suzy sprung to her feet and ran after the dog. Each time her eye loses him, he is in a different part of the road. After many times of turning left and right she finally stopped and looked around to see that she was completely lost.

Betty woke up to the screeching noise of her mother's scream. Because she didn't get much sleep she was drowsy and filled with tiredness. She thought it was another one of her mom's nightmares but this time it was different. As she runs down her mom is crying on the couch while her dad is on the phone with the police department. Betty frantically asks and asks her mom what is going on but she is too frantic to speak. Immediately she realizes that Suzy is gone. Her body was still as if her feet were stuck to the carpet with cement. As Betty's dad puts the phone down on the sofa they try to comfort her mom. Though inside Betty was extremely scared she was as calm as possible for her mom.

That day as cars were rushing around and search groups were looking for Suzy, Betty went out on her own. Betty was confused and felt that there was more that her parents didn't know. Betty walked in the cold and frightening air.

That night as she laid in bed knowing her parents were still up waiting for a phone call, she thought about why this could have happened to her and her family. "What did we do to deserve this?" As guilt progressively builds up about her brother and sister she can't help but think. "Was I responsible?" Betty was filled with confusion and didn't know if it was her fault that her sister was missing. If only she had forgiven herself and been there for her sister.

As the sun started to rise and people were waking up Betty threw on her clothes and went out to look for Suzy. The neighborhood was dark and filled with fog. The wind was blowing and trees were dancing to the sway of the wind.

As she walks she spots a dog. The dog was mysterious. Betty slowly approaches it and it turns around and calmly

trots away. Betty started to run after the dog and suddenly she lost sight of it. As she turns in all different directions she sees it far away by a bush. Betty ran towards it and it scampered away. Every now and then Betty would lose it and the dog would be on another spot. Betty had a feeling that the dog was trying to tell her something so she kept following.

Eventually when she got to a small town nearby she thought that the dog was gone. Betty went to the store to get some water and there in the aisle was the dog. She was shocked and confused that no one was reacting to the dog. She walked over to it and it led her outside and down the road again. After the sun was starting to fade she thought maybe this dog is just stray and doesn't want to be bothered, but then she looked up to see her brother's apartment right in front of her.

Betty had not been to her brother's apartment in a very long time. Though he goes to college nearby they still didn't see him as much as they wanted. Nothing made her feel the need to go. As Betty stood there in front of the dirty collage apartment her eyes started to water and memories came back. Betty just wanted to pretend none of this happened but as the dog walked through the open doorway, Betty followed.

Betty entered the house with worry and sadness. The dog sits in the middle of the room calmly. The apartment smelled like their brother's clothes. The Sound of footsteps filled the house and slowly Suzy walked down the stairs of the apartment. Betty's eyes opened wide and joy filled her face as she ran towards her little sister. Betty felt so sad for making her feel the way she did.

"I'm ok," Suzy said to her. "I am so sorry." Betty felt relief to find her but confused on why she was here. Suzy explained that she followed the same dog and let her here. Suzy was calm and seemed as if she wasn't scared at all. As both sisters sat in the quiet room they looked around and tried to remember the time when Josh was here.

As the hours went by Betty started looking around. She stepped into Josh's room and there on his desk was her handbag. She had been missing her handbag for a very long time. Betty picked it up and looked inside. She found her wallet, gum, and a starbucks gift card. As she checks the small pocket on the side of her bag she sees a small piece of paper. Inside she reads

"Betty, I want you to know I am sorry. I know I hurt you and I just want to apologize. Sometimes I get off track but that does not excuse the way I treat you and forget about you sometimes. I love you, and I know you love me, even though sometimes it doesn't seem like it. Never Forget that.

-Love Josh

Betty was in awe, it was as if the words were floating through her mind. This was all she needed the clarification to forgive herself. Every day since the car crash Betty is filled up with regret and wishfulness that she had just forgiven him. This letter had given her the closure and everything she needed. All she wanted was for Josh to know that she loved him and she wished that she told him more often.

The dog walked slowly into the room without making a noise and sat down next to Betty. As its sparkling eyes looked up at her almost as if it was speaking, Betty knew. She was with her brother once more.

Maria Clark

Age: 17, Grade: 11

School Name: Manchester High School, Midlothian, VA

Educator: Rebecca Lynch

Category: Flash Fiction

A Night to Remember

A Night to Remember

The text Michael sent to his mother: *Are you drinking?*

Michael and Jane waited anxiously in the car for a response and flinched at the vibration of his phone: *Not at all.*

Greg forced me to have sex with him and is still in the living room.

Michael snatched his phone from its place on the phone mount on the ceiling of his car. His fingers moved rapidly across the screen: *Did you call the police?"*

Silence.

I'm coming. He twisted the keys harshly in the ignition and the car sputtered to life.

"Don't drop me off yet," Jane insisted, "I don't want you to be alone."

Micahel sighed and nodded grimly.

"Siri, call Mom."

Greg picked up and confirmed when questioned, "Yeah, Kris is drinking."

So the couple left and arrived at Kris's house in a matter of minutes.

Jane couldn't help but think this Greg had something to do with Kris's decision to break her sobriety.

She held her breath as Michael opened the door.

Jane had no idea what to expect, how to react, whether to say anything-

A large, brown dog with pointed ears greeted them, tongue lolling out of his mouth and tail quivering with excitement.

Jane reached down to scratch Kris's dog, Tiko, behind the ears. Tiko's presence was no different from usual visits, and at that the girl released a sigh.

Her fear was assuaged until she saw something that didn't align with their routine.

A man towered above them, looking wholly unconcerned as he talked to the Micahel.

"When did you get here?" Michael asked, his voice civil but eyes revealing an intense dislike Jane had never seen in him before. .

"Just a bit ago, I found her like this..." Greg's voice trailed off and he shrugged.

Their words blurred together and all Jane could hear was the click-clacking of the dog's nails hitting the plywood floor.

Jane did not move. She was frozen in her spot in the entryway, feet glued down by some invisible force. She squatted silently to pet the dog, keeping her eyes trained on his wagging tail.

After what seemed like a long discussion, the boy rushed to the living room couch where a lump was moving under blankets.

Jane slowly raised her gaze.

The lump of blankets turned out to be a woman; Kris. She whimpered phrases of self-defeat as her son attempted to soothe her.

What happened here? Michael's girlfriend wondered, *is it right to even assume without knowing?*

The more cynical part of Jane pondered, *was the text even real? If she lied about drinking, was that a lie too?*

But why would she lie about something like that?

The boy coaxed his mom off the couch, and the couple soon realized the woman was not clothed waist-down under the covers.

It must be true then.... Right? Jane wanted to believe this so badly that it became a fact in her mind.

The girl averted her gaze and the boy ignored this fact. Arm and arm, mother and son slowly headed for a bedroom.

Before they were even halfway, his mom whipped her head around and cried out,

"I'm sorry, Jane. I'm sorry-"

Jane stiffened and her heart shattered as she tried to find the words to respond, “No-o... it’s okay-”.

Her response came out in a murmur and she returned to studying the dog.

“Come on mom, she doesn’t want to see you like this,” Michael said softly, steering her towards her bedroom.

The sound of her sobs from behind the closed door were deafening, and each minute that went by was forever engraved in the girl’s memory.

Jane slowly unattached herself from her position in the entryway and sat on the edge of the couch, to the left of the tall man named Greg, the “friend” of the boy’s mother.

This was the man from the text that her boyfriend’s mother sent, the one that supposedly forced himself on her.

He remained entranced by the television, leaning over subconsciously for a better view. Carelessly popped cheese balls into his mouth and licked his fingers like a five-year old. Except, as a grown man, it was more gross and piggish than cute and innocent.

Jane fidgeted and kept turning to look at the bedroom doorway until the boy finally exited, attempting to shut the door behind him when everyone heard a high pitched wail coming from the bedroom:

“Don’t leave me Michael! Don’t leave-”

Michael rushed back to his mom’s bedside, coaxing her back to calm, insisting he’d be back soon.

Jane lowered her head shamefully. Michael had to take her home. She was distracting from what his mother needed; her son.

All the while the tall man sat, absorbed in the television.

Greg didn’t even acknowledge Michael’s volcanic form that soon erupted in the form of tears.

Suddenly, every detail, every noise, every color drained out of the room and Jane and Michael were all that was left.

The girl became his Pompeii when she opened her arms to him, and his body wracked with sobs as he cried openly into her shoulder.

Jane held on tight, but not as tight as he did.

Fielding Croft

Age: 13, Grade: 8

School Name: St Catherine's School, Richmond, VA

Educator: Julie Elmore

Category: Short Story

Hidden Guilt

Hidden Guilt

She said that she started to not feel like herself right after Monument City Classic. About a month later she told my dad that it hurt too bad for her to get up and get her own water. For days she sat on the couch and would occasionally go to the doctor but come back with the same unanswered question. What was wrong with her? What was causing her so much pain? It wasn't until I was getting picked up by my parents from my grandparents house that I found out why. I remember it was a warm, balmy night when dad's car pulled up the long driveway dotted with flower bushes on the sides that the bigger cars always scraped as they drove by, and my little sister came running out, eager to tell our parents about her day. She opened the door and stopped mid sentence.

"Where is Mom?" she said, her eyes gleaming with innocence.

"Let's get in the car first and then I'll tell you," said Dad.

I could tell that he was trying to hide something from our grandparents. He didn't want to be overwhelmed by questions. But then it hit me: Gramma and Papa had been trying to distract us all night by taking us to Burger King for dinner as a "treat" and by letting us have two melon candies. They had been trying to cheer us up before the big blow hit us. At the time I had been so worried about making sure no one that I knew saw me walking into Burger King that I hadn't been thinking about what could be going on. Once we were in the car, dad told us that he and mom had gone up to the UVA hospital earlier that day and they had said that she needed to stay and would need another open heart surgery. He had tried to say it as calmly and matter of factly he could but I could hear the pain in his voice.

"Girls, today your mom and I went to UVA hospital," Emerson, my sister, whimpers, "and the doctors found something wrong with her valve and they said her clot from last summer hasn't completely dissolved", now Emerson's crying, "she has to stay there for a little while but we can visit her all the time."

He gives up trying to comfort us with words and grabs her little hand and squeezes it the rest of the way home. He doesn't have another hand because he's driving, but if he did I would be holding it. I just looked out the window as if not focusing on the fact could make it go away, as if it could change the reality of the situation. I remember getting mad at my sister for crying so much, but I think I was just mad at myself for wanting her to stop making it a big deal because maybe then I could pretend like it wasn't a big deal, too. I guess I wasn't super surprised when we heard she had to stay in the hospital because it had happened last summer too, and we knew she had heart problems and that she would need another surgery we just didn't know when.

When we got home dad said that we should call mom, and talk to her on facetime. He told us that we had to be brave and not cry because if we cried then she would cry. It was no use as soon as my sister saw my mom it was full on water works all over again. We talked to my mom for a couple minutes about why she was there and how long she'd be there, and after my sister and my dad went to the couch and sat together and I went to my room to be alone because that was how I dealt with upsetting things. Well not really, normally I'd talk to my mom about it but I couldn't. I couldn't tell her that I was mad, and that I was frustrated because I didn't want her to think I was taking it out on her. I was mad, mad that life wouldn't be the same while she was away, mad that I couldn't see her everyday, and mad that I didn't know who I was mad at.

We went to visit frequently. Our dad visited most of all of us. Her surgery date was finally set, but it was set on my sister's birthday and she was so, so upset and she wouldn't let anyone forget it. I went to school the next day knowing that I hadn't told anyone but my best friends, but I walked in and my advisor came running over and gave me the biggest hug I think I've ever gotten. The only thing I wanted in that moment was out, I didn't want her to hug me and I didn't want her to make it a big deal, because having her make it a big deal made it *feel* like a big deal to

me.

The next day my dad came to me and reminded me that I had a volleyball tournament the day of my mom's surgery. *Like I didn't already know.*

"I can come up to D.C. to pick you up Saturday night and you can come to the hospital", he said as hope trickled into his eyes.

Was he out of his mind? I mean of course I knew that my mom's surgery was a huge deal but I was mad that it was now affecting what I loved to do.

"Dad, I love you and mom very much and I know that it would mean a lot for me to be there but this is something I have to do and honestly it's something I want to do."

I felt so, so guilty after that. I mean, of course I would want to be there for my family, but I had a duty to my team and to myself to go and have the best time at the tournament.

I drove up to D.C. with Nyla and Campbell, we played great the first two days, I had the best time and I didn't have to worry about my mom, but then the third day, the day of my mom's surgery, we lost our first game and there was nothing I could do about it. I kind of lost it and started crying and I didn't even know why at the time. After though, I knew it was all the stress just bubbling over the top. About an hour later, dad called saying that mom was out of surgery

and she was doing great. I was so relieved. He reminded me to be extra nice to my sister because it was her birthday after all and neither mom nor dad were there with her.

When we got back home to Nyla's house, my mom's friend, Nicole, picked me up and took me home. It was a pretty pleasant car ride, not once did she ask personal questions about my mom or anything like that (even though I would've told her), she just asked about my tournament. She was so interested it was like we were both in middle school gossiping about boys.

I got home and spent the rest of the day with my sister and my Mimi for my sister's birthday. She didn't complain, she just took what was given. We made a cake and played board games together. We called my dad who was in the recovery room with my mom, and I was secretly hoping that my mom would still be out of it and say something funny but she was perfectly composed per usual.

She had to stay in the hospital for a few more weeks to recover from the surgery. We would walk around the bright hospital filled with whites and pale blue colors and we would see signs for the blood bank and signs for the ICU and hoped that our mom had never had to follow the signs to those parts of the hospital. We looked at the bulletin board with the doctor's pets on it because that was Emerson's favorite thing to do when we visited. When we finally got to my mom's room in the hospital I remember feeling cautious as if when I touched her she would break. I remember trying to coax that childish, cheerful grin of her that I cherished so much, but to the contrary of the situation, I loved being in the hospital. When we were there she would whisper to us about her roommates or the terrible food, nad one time we even brought her Mellow Mushroom, she was very excited! After watching the doctors and nurses come and go from her room on our visits to the hospital it made me want to help people just like they had

helped my mom, but they didn't just help my mom they helped our whole family. My mom told me that I should do what I want to do in life, and not do something just for her, but I want to be a surgeon and I'm not just doing it for her I'm doing it for me.

When she got home we were in the midst of covid, so we were locked down completely. In the weeks after she got home my dad had to give her an IV and I wanted to watch and see how to do it, but they wouldn't let me. There was a nurse that would come to our house once a week and check up on my mom, but one morning when she wasn't coming I was woken up and told to get out to the car. This happened a lot, over the span of one week we went to either the emergency room or all the way up to UVA six times. We had to go because my mom was having an allergic reaction to her medicine, or she needed to get a biopsy done because her skin was turning bright red like a tomato and it was peeling. For a while we had skin all over the house and I gotta be honest it was pretty gross.

After such an experience, I appreciate certain things more. Knowing that my mom will always be there when I get home has a different but good feeling to it because I am more grateful for it, and coming home to hear her asking me about the latest gossip at school is one of the best parts of my day.

Over time my mom needed to go up there less and less and she stopped needing to take her medication. She still hasn't gone back to work in person but she is taking baby steps to get back to normal, and that is all I can ask for because she is healthy.

Adam Erickson

Age: 13, Grade: 8

School Name: George H Moody Middle School, Henrico, VA

Educator: Patricia Walker

Category: Humor

My goal is to defeat yours

My Goal is to Defeat Yours

For most of my life, every Saturday has been filled with minivans and lawn chairs. As a youth soccer player in Richmond, I have witnessed many strange habits of soccer moms and dads as they cheer on their precious children and yell at the referees. Sometimes the parents will even bring cowbells... yeah, cowbells. It can be life or death out there on the grass, and not necessarily just on the field, especially when you are playing on a travel team.

As an eight year old, I was mostly oblivious to the screaming parents and the competitiveness and just loved playing the game. Although, I have to admit, I loved hearing them shout, "Great footwork, Adam!" This season was going to be even more intense because our team was now old enough to have goalies, and so we recruited a boy named Christopher. None of the other boys on the team wanted to be goalie because they feared their parents' reactions if they missed saving a ball. Yet, Christopher, who wasn't really into soccer, volunteered just so he could tell the kids at school that he was chosen as the goalie on Elite Black. As a player for Elite Black, we had a certain prestige that we were proud of because we were a step above the Premiere level teams.

I came to find out that Christopher thought that being a goalie meant he just had to stand there and do nothing, literally nothing. No one except my best friend Nicholas, the right winger, and I realized that Christopher did not actually understand the position until our first game. It was a normal Saturday morning in the hot Virginia sun, and our strikers started the kick off. Parents were cheering for our team, and all of the players were getting in the zone. This is when Christopher decided he would sit himself down in the middle of the goalie box and start picking dandelions, and his nose.

Surprisingly, the intense parents on the sidelines thought this was cute at the time, so they put down their cowbells and picked up their cameras, as if he was actually doing something worth posting on Facebook. They were all laughing except Nicholas's dad who could be very loud at times, but not in an obnoxious way. As soon as he saw Christopher picking flowers, he couldn't go two seconds without yelling something sarcastic about the situation. So before I could even think, he yelled, "Christopher, I thought you were the goalie, not the flower boy!"

At this point, everyone was so caught up with Christopher, that nobody even noticed the ball being driven down the field towards the goal. Luckily, Derek the defender yelled to Christopher, and boy, did he look scared. When Christopher looked up and saw the ball flying at him, he dove to get out the way, but ended up saving it... with his face. Moments later, it sounded like the parents were playing Jingle Bells with their cowbells as they perceived that Christopher had achieved an amazing header to save the goal.

I would have said that Christopher was pretty happy with himself, but that would be an understatement. Christopher had the biggest grin on his face like he just woke up on Christmas morning. He stood up, and our team ran at him like a thousand of Santa's reindeer. As I was glancing around, looking for any distraction from Christopher and his swollen, red nose, I saw the Elite coach looking down and writing on his clipboard. Elite is an even higher level team than Elite Black, and it was my absolute dream to make the Elite team one day. Of course with my luck, the Elite coach shows up right before Christopher makes the save, so he never witnessed the whole gardening scene, and might actually consider Christopher for next season!

Unbelievably, the ball never even reached our side for the rest of the game. Something about Christopher's "amazing save" must have inspired everyone to go full Ronaldo against the other team. Soon the game was over, and as our coach was praising "our amazing goalie", the Richmond United guy came over and started speaking to Christopher.

I was just so confused. One minute, he was sitting in on the floor, plucking flowers out the ground, and the next, he was some sort of hero. I've heard of Christmas miracles, but what happened that August morning should never have happened.

The next day at school, Christopher completely changed the way he saw life. He no longer saw himself as a nobody,

but now truly believed he was a celebrity. That day at school, he didn't wear his dorky field day t-shirt from kindergarten, but something much worse: his jersey. Apparently, soccer is Christopher's new way of life, and unbelievably, it seemed that everyone was suddenly a fan. Students would come up to Christopher, give him a pat on the back and praise him for his save. Somehow, out of everybody at our school, Nickolas and I seemed to be the only ones that saw him for the gardening goalkeeper that he really was.

That night, we met for practice again, and this time we had a "very special guest", at least that was our coach's description of Christopher's dad. His dad had a potbelly and a big white beard, so I would definitely have remembered him if I saw him before on the sidelines or in the parking lot. After Christopher saved the game, I guess now his dad wants to get involved with his son, the famous goalie. Suddenly, this huge man who seemed to be about 65 years old started to try to give our team some soccer tips. He went on and on about not ball-hogging and telling us that we have to share the ball because teamwork is the true "spirit of soccer". I tried not to roll my eyes, but as I looked around at my teammates, it seemed like they were all gobbling up every word out of this old man's mouth. I guess they thought that he was the one who taught the "amazing" Christopher, so he must know what he is talking about. I had enough. I decided that I was going to train to be a goalie, so this nonsense with Christopher being the best would stop.

Soccer seemed to not be the only thing Christopher was getting lucky at. A couple days later, we had the class spelling bee. I was getting words like "serendipity" and "incense", and Christopher had "organic" and "sleigh". Suddenly, all the prettiest girls in the school were also trying to talk to Christopher and walking with him in the hallways. Not only was he suddenly super popular with the ladies, but academically he was also outshining everyone. In science, he was the only one to get a 100 on the test, and I had to stare at my own test with a big, fat red F on it. Later in the week, we had a schoolwide assembly to listen to a local semi pro soccer player suggest how we can achieve our dream through hard work, and Christopher was chosen to go up on stage with him because the principal told him that Christopher was the best player in the school.

By the next game on Saturday, I felt even more annoyed with Christopher than I had ever imagined. I was not jealous because I could admit that Christopher was now making progress becoming somewhat of a goalie, but honestly, he was *not* there yet. This time he at least stood up, instead of picking flowers, and he also touched the ball for the first time since that "good save" happened. Except when he touched the ball, he dropped it immediately and had to get bailed out by our defenders. Somehow, no one on the sidelines even seemed to notice that he was horrible! They kept shouting encouraging words like, "Good idea, Christopher!" and "Good try! That shot was impossible!"

The game after that, he made his first pass, however, he muffed it and it went straight to their forward. Unbelievably, Nickolas's dad started getting mad at Derek, our defender. Somehow, the parents thought that it was his fault, not Christopher's. I could not believe how obviously horrible Christopher was at the game, but I seemed to be the only one who knew it. Clearly, I would beat him at tryouts, but I didn't know how much more of this nonsense I could stand until then.

Finally, the fourth game of the season came which should have been the star on top of the Christmas tree for me, but once again the world had gone insane. Christopher was "hurt". He showed up at warm ups with crutches and claimed that when he was invited to go play with the pro soccer player, he was injured while sliding into one of the professional players during a shooting drill.

The coach finally said the words I had been waiting for all season, "Adam, get in the goal." I was thrilled to show everyone what a real keeper could do, and maybe everyone would stop the nonsense of everyone else believing that Christopher had any skills. However, even though I made a couple amazing saves such as a top corner save and one where I dove backwards and punched it over the crossbar, no one noticed my moves at all because they were so caught up with Christopher and asking if he was comfortable. Our coach didn't even see that I was the one who saved the game for our team because he kept looking over at Christopher on the bench. In fact, after the game as I was walking off the field, my coach whispered over to me, "I guess we're stuck with you again next week."

Somehow, despite my amazing saves in the game, no one, not even my coach, even noticed that I was the best keeper on the team. I had one week to be ready for my next shot in goal and to convince everyone that they were suffering from temporary insanity with their faith in Christopher over me. I trained like Karate Kid and Rocky that week by going up and down my stairs, drinking protein shakes, and eating Cliff bars. I even took an extra Flinstone Vitamin the morning before my big chance.

The moment came: our second game with me in goal. Once again, I had multiple extraordinary saves, but still, unbelievably, no one seemed to care. However, the one time I missed the ball, it went in the top corner after our opponents beat all of our defenders. Of course, Nickolas's dad noticed my one mistake that was not my fault at all and started yelling at me that I should have saved it. The coach only made it worse by saying, "Don't worry. Christopher is back next week!"

When he did come back the next weekend, he was a lot better than before he got hurt. I don't know what happened, but all of the sudden, Christopher could dive and actually save the ball. I could not believe my eyes as I saw him actually save a penalty kick and a 1 V1.

Just as I was about to lose my mind, it was December, and that meant it was time for the tryouts that would determine if we would become Elite or Elite Black. At this point, I would rather get coal in my stocking than let Christopher make the Elite team, only now Christopher was going to make it even more difficult.

During tryouts, the goalies were called over to a separate part than the field players. As I was walking over there, I received several weird looks before Christopher came over to me and asked where I was going. I responded that I was here to try out for goalie, and he just laughed. We started off with several drills which I felt like I did better than most of the other kids. However, Christopher did well too, and the Elite goalie coach seemed impressed with both of us. At the end of the tryout, Christopher and I both got to be goalies on different teams, and we faced each other head to head.

In the game, we both got really good teams and it was a competitive match. I saved three shots and a 1v1. However, Christopher did well too as he saved a penalty kick and four shots. By the end of the game, the score was 2-1, in my favor. I walked over to say "Good game" to Christopher, but he just walked past me with a grimace. I smiled knowing that finally was better than him, and it was only a matter of time until results came out.

Finally, after two weeks of waiting, it was December 25. That morning we got a phone call, and I picked it up because I assumed it was my coach, and it was. He called to tell me that I had made the Elite team. A huge sigh of relief came out, and I knew that finally, Christopher would get humbled. I would have never thought that the Grinch known as Christopher would have ever lost his lucky streak. Somehow though, I finally had my Christmas Miracle.

Olivia Fairlamb

Age: 17, Grade: 11

School Name: Collegiate School, Richmond, VA

Educator: Pete Follansbee

Category: Poetry

Empty Sunday Afternoons

Empty Sunday Afternoons

On empty Sunday afternoons, I've developed a habit of driving to the park
because it's the prettiest place I can remember how to get to when my thoughts turn grey.
I don't get out of my car.
I wear my sunglasses to shield myself from eye contact.
I loop around the three roads there, and I park in each parking lot,
and I watch the lovers lying together on the grass of the hills,
the men fishing in the water that I always forget is there,
the families hanging streamers and balloons in the pavilions, greeting friends with hugs.

I sit in my car alone.

As I grow less self-conscious, I roll my windows down,
let my music leak out,
let the sunlight that sings the leaves meet my skin for a moment
before the breeze blows the warmth away.
I can hear the shouts of the frisbee golfers
and kicks against soccer balls, followed by cheering.
Swings creak as grown adults sit on them and laugh.

On my drive home, the burden of existence weighs a little less,
or maybe I've learned to bear it better
because I know there's something out there beyond the repetition of the calendar.
I've seen it in the child tripping over the root
but smiling as he gets up and runs to his parents, who hold hands.
I've seen it in the green-haired woman crouching to talk to her two little dogs,
laughing at their wagging tails.
I don't tell myself that they have it all the time,
but in these sparks of moments, it's there.
If I listen, they whisper that maybe, if I came back with someone else,
we could climb a tree together, and catch it like a firefly,
glowing for just a moment,
before we let it go and wait in darkness until another one comes close enough to be caught.

Kara Finley

Age: 13, Grade: 7

School Name: St Catherine's School, Richmond, VA

Educator: Shelly Dean

Category: Short Story

Forgotten but Not Gone

When something moves farther from you, it appears to recede. I suppose the same could be said for memories. The longer ago something happens, the blurrier the memory, the smaller it seems, like boats on the horizon. But what happens when you lose your memories all too quickly? Soon your memories are lost on the horizon. Too small to see or remember anymore.

The waves against my feet are soothing. As I look out onto the horizon, I soon forget why I'm here. Suddenly I'm five years old again, looking out at the sailboats on the horizon with my grandfather. The world was so much simpler then. He takes my hand, and we start walking along the beach. We look at all the boats on the horizon. He tells me all about how he used to sail and all the places he had gone while we picked up pretty sea glass. He was so patient, waiting as I picked up every shell and rock that piqued my interest. Everything looked so big. Maybe that was because I was so small, or perhaps it was because I didn't understand so much. Everything was so new and exciting.

My grandfather loved this island. Maybe it was the people there or the fantastic view. Or just how different it is from home. I never asked why he liked it so much, but I have a theory. I think it was the memories it held. Memories he made with my grandmother, my parents, on the ocean, with all the people who live here. And the memories he was making with me. I wish we had more time to make more.

Without my permission, my mind wanders to a couple of years later. My dad was unloading the stroller from the back of the car for my little brother. He was the newest addition to our family. I wasn't sure how I felt about him yet. I was standing by the door to my grandparent's house, holding my mom's hand, waiting for my grandparents to open the door. I remember everyone had been a little off lately, a little tense, especially my grandparents. I had overheard multiple conversations about a doctor and some other things I didn't quite understand. Everyone sounded sad when they talked about it, but no one had told me what was going on yet.

When they finally came to the door, they came out and started talking to my mom. Well, Granny does most of the talking. Pap-Pap just stood there. Just as I was about to go crazy with impatience, they stop talking and turn to me. Mom looks at me and says Pap-Pap has a disease called dementia and that he was going to start to forget things. Small things at first, like what he was doing, and then big things like where he was, who we were, and even who he was. She told me not to worry because he wouldn't start forgetting the big things until later, like a long time from now. She looked worried about it, though.

It took me a couple of years to fully understand what she had said. Then one day, it hit me. Pap-Pap, one of my biggest supporters and one of my favorite people, was going to forget me. He would forget all the time we spent together, the birthday party we threw for the dog, walking along the docks and looking at boats, feeding the koi, looking for four-leaf clovers in the grass, the time we spent on the island. All of it gone. There wouldn't be anything left. My grandmother saw me crying about this, and she told me I would be the last person he forgot. Even after he forgot my brother, my mom, and even her, I would be the last person that he forgot because he loved me so, so, so much. Maybe it was a foolish hope to hold on to, but at least it was something. At least I could hang on to that and believe it was true, even if it wasn't.

All the adults tried to pretend like everything was normal. My grandparents moved, so they were closer to our family. We saw them all the time. Most days, things were normal. He helped build a treehouse in the backyard, we went on walks through the woods, we even baked cookies. But, there was always something a little bit off. He would ask a question twice in a conversation even if he had already gotten an answer, he was irritable and impatient in a way he wasn't before, and he wasn't always present and in the moment. He told the same stories over and over again. How he had a dog who brought him box turtles from the woods, his school, his youth, and sailing. Always sailing. He really only talked about his childhood and things that happened recently. It's like he forgot the middle part of his life. But he never forgot about his time sailing.

He would come to my figure skating shows. He would sing along to the music and talk to every person he met about his childhood in Baltimore, Maryland. It was like he didn't know they were strangers. It was kind of funny to watch but at the same time a little embarrassing and sad. He would try to describe some of the moves he saw skaters do. Like "the one where they stand on one leg and skate down the ice," or "the one where they stick their leg out and spin around." He would try to do the move, hopping around on one foot or moving in a circle.

For a couple years, there was a steady decline. He forgot the little things at first, like my mom said, and then he suddenly started to forget big things, like how to use the oven and how to brush his teeth. He became too much for my grandmother to take care of by herself. As much as she wanted to keep him at home, she knew that he wouldn't get the help he needed if he stayed with her. So she found a nursing home for him to live in.

The day we moved him in was sad. It was the last day of fourth grade. I was pulled out of school early. When we got there, I remember that it had that distinct old person smell and mothballs. All the people living there were staring at my brother and me. I remember staring at the floor, so I didn't have to look at them. There were weird stains on the floor. It made me so sad that my Pap-Pap would be living here, with strangers. Not that it mattered to him. At that point, he was so bad that he barely remembered us. Later had happened sooner than I thought.

From then on, I hated going to visit him. It was selfish, but being there just made me uncomfortable. Sometimes when I visited him, he seemed almost normal, just a little bit off. Other times he didn't remember my mom or me. He seldom remembered my brother. He wasn't the same Pap-Pap who walked on the beach with me all those years ago.

Then it finally happened. We got the dreaded call. The one that said that his condition had worsened and that he was in the hospital. He was in the hospital because his body basically had forgotten how to function. That's the thing about dementia. It doesn't just steal memories; it also steals lives and futures.

We went to the hospital. We walked down the halls. All the doors looked the same. I kept my eyes on the ground, trying not to look at all the other people who would probably get to leave at some point. Although no one had said it, there was a part of me that knew this could be goodbye. My grandmother was sitting outside his door. My mom gave her a long hug. Family I hadn't seen in years was there. They tried to make conversation, asked me how school was if I liked my teachers, was I still playing the violin. My answers were always "good," "yes," and "no." Then the nurse told us we could go in. My extended family went in first. I don't remember exactly how long it was until they came out, but it wasn't long enough. They came out, and I stood up to walk in the door. It was then that I realized what I was doing. This could be the last time I see him.

I don't remember what I said, but I do remember the blank look he had on his face. I remember how weak he looked, so different from seven years ago. He used to seem like this massive presence in my life. Now looking down on him, he seemed so small and different than he did back then. I don't remember the conversation we had then. I don't think it was much of a conversation, really, just me trying not to cry. I can't be sure if he even knew who I was, but as I stood up to go, I saw something in his eyes. A light of recognition, like maybe he did remember me. Like perhaps I hadn't faded from his memories after all.

I don't remember being told that he had died. I can't remember much after that visit to the hospital. I don't think my brother realized what had happened. To be fair, it's a hard thing to wrap your head around, losing someone, never seeing them again. We started to plan a funeral service for him. My mom and grandmother worked for days. I was asked to write the eulogy. We invited all of the family and friends to come to the service. So many people came so many people who would never see him again. So many people were left with only memories.

Before the service, I was standing out in the hallway, practicing my speech. I started crying, thinking about all the things he would miss. Big moments like graduations and birthdays and little moments like violin recitals and skating shows. He will miss almost all of my brother's childhood. As I stood crying in the hall, I remember trying to figure out what's worse, losing a person you loved, left with only the memories you made together, or never knowing them at all.

I gave the eulogy, I cried a little while giving it. When I walked up to the microphone in front of all those people, I remember the sheer terror I felt at that moment. I was standing in front of all these people who had known this man for more years than I had been alive, and I was giving the eulogy. I remember thinking that I was unworthy and shouldn't be giving this eulogy, that I didn't know him for very long. Then I caught my grandmother's eye. She looked so proud. That's when I remembered why I was doing this. I was doing this for him. He would have wanted me to get up there and speak because I knew a part of him that not many people on that patio would see. I didn't know him for long before we started losing him, but knowing him through all of that made my story just as important. After I had finished, all the adults came up to me to tell me I did a fantastic job and that he would have been so proud. We ate excellent food. Spring rolls, cookies, little hamburgers, cookies, bacon-wrapped scallops, cookies. Willow Oaks makes delicious funeral cookies. After that, we went out for dinner. My brother made a tower out of french fries. It's funny how our memories work. I don't remember what I said to my grandfather on his deathbed, but I remember the french fry tower my little brother made.

Those first couple of months after were the hardest. My grandmother seemed sad all the time. I wanted to help but wasn't sure how. The grief I was feeling and the grief she was feeling were entirely different things. There would be days where everything is fine and normal, and I don't think about how he died. And then there would be, still are, days where I'm perfectly normal, and then it will hit me, like a fire poker through the heart, that he's dead and I will never see him again.

Sometimes I'll be skating, and I'll look out into the crowd. I'll look for the man with the strange hat talking to strangers or singing along with the music and realize that he isn't there. The worst pain a person can feel is when everything seems fine, and then out of nowhere, you remember something sad, like the death of a loved one. Even though it happened months ago, the pain is just as raw as when it happened.

A couple of months after he died, people would come up to me and say, "I'm sorry for your loss," or some variation of it. Teachers, family, my skating coach, friends. I know they mean well, but it's an awkward thing to have to respond to. For the most part, I just look down, nod, and mumble something like a thank you.

It's been a little under a year since the funeral. The family came back to the island to his favorite place to spread his ashes. As sad as I am to be here, I'm enjoying my time here. It's as good as I remember. The wild dogs, the beach, the food. Even the small mountains you have to climb to get to the house are bearable. And the views are breathtaking. The water is a gorgeous turquoise that you can't see anywhere else. Looking at the fog on the mountains in the morning is probably one of the best ways to wake up. It's bittersweet to be back here.

Suddenly I'm saved from my memories. It's my brother telling me we're going to scatter Pap-Pap's ashes. He obviously doesn't understand the seriousness of the situation. The sun has just started to go down. It paints the sky a beautiful orangey-pink. My grandmother stands on the rock with my mom and step-uncles. As I watch them scatter the ashes, I can't help but look out on the horizon. I watch as the little sailboats in the bay get smaller, the current pulling them away, like lost memories.

Greyson Fisher

Age: 16, Grade: 11

School Name: Appomattox Regional Governor's School, Chesterfield, VA

Educator: Gail Giewont

Category: Poetry

The Grim Reapers Fingers Are Soft

Burned Houses

Someone once told me to never burn bridges,
so I asked, what about houses?

What happens if you burn a house?
Do the residents run out and flee?

What happens if you set a torch to the living room first?
Do memories grab children and run to safety?

If you set the kitchen on fire first,
would the pots and pans hide the cooking books?

How does the fireplace burn?
I think it'll give off crackles like a laughing maniac.

I think the roof would cave in first
falling first onto the lovers' bed, embracing it in fire.

The windows on the left side would
pour smoke and coughing memories with hot bleach.

The windows on the right side would
explode all at once as a woman holds a baby for the firemen.

How does a house burn?
Does the fire slowly spread to the bridge?

Death on the Menu

Death is raw on Tuesday
It's thawed by Monday
But now it's raw on Tuesday.

We were heading into church
when I heard the dog yip
and the gunfire.
It came from the neighborhood
with the chain-link fences.
The places mothers tell

their kids not to go.

Death is cold on Sunday.

The Church is hot inside
Too many people,
a sea of red and plaster smiles.
I feel alone
in this sea of fleeing
eyes and crying babies.

Death is fresh on Saturday

Halfway through the sermon
as the priest
his bony bald head raised
another firecracker echoes.
This time there is no
yip.
It hangs in the air like
the soft leather of a whip.

Death is free on Friday

The Italian man smiles.
He looks like Papa John,
in human form.
Is he a regular
or an inbetweener
like me. Is he
Like me.

Death is served on Wednesday
Full dressing

The sermon ends,
Mass ends,
but no one moves.
Are they waiting?
If so for what, for who?
For the cheap Jesus
bobbleheads to finally
stop squeaking?
Then there's the rush.
flee from the
plagued pews and
sickly children!
Across dark streets
to open doors where
family waits.

Death is forgotten on Thursday.

Yellow Pages
Old pages have a brand new smell.

They feel like fingerprints.
The backs of old books never bend
they splinter suddenly.
Bristling spines
werewolves
popping up like hunched claws.
Black leather covers
draped in cool silk
stitched together by sutures.
Snarls with cut fingers
whites of periods.

Lucifer's nightmare of Boko Haram, 2007

My children sit beside me
in clumps of fire and heat.

My children wear foreign helmets,
dress in foreign tongues.

Children given the adults job to
kill other children given the same job.

They march in death's vacuum
holding guns as torches to the night.

We gather around the group
slithering closer in swarms.

The savanna stretches outward.
tall grasses, fingers, rise up.

Hot breezes coat our backs.
The red dust seizes our breath.

The village falls backward,
twine huts collapsing outward.

Death rides with me tonight;
he sits shotgun.

Death hunches with the pellets-
and gunpowder too eager to escape.

My children break the walls of
generations with fire and spit.

Shadows lose form in the wind,
tumbling onto dust-born streets.

Empty mouths scream of years lost.
Guns snap at wooden shields.

Men run from one shadow to the next.
The smell of adrenaline reeks of them.

Houses turn into pigpens trapped with bodies.

It becomes too loud to hear death.

The raid stops at the fields
where the children run away.

I look back at the burning trees.
I have never seen so many bodies before.

The scene changes to god's house
His hand echoes the fate of my deeds.

My wings are torn like food
and swallowed by clouds and fire.

How I rose, shaking, on a little rock.
God's little angel stuck in a sea of hell.

I cried out for Him, but how could he
hear me when my wings were broken.

In the village the final hut falls.
A wounded woman is pushed into the street
shot.

I have so much to learn from humans about terror.

Greyson Fisher

Age: 16, Grade: 11

School Name: Appomattox Regional Governor's School, Chesterfield, VA

Educator: Gail Giewont

Category: Poetry

To the shadows of Worlds

Of Lost Stars

To see a star is by nature to travel time.
To experience the fact of a million years ago.
A star that birthed before our planet formed skin.
Before Jupiter's many moons entered an uneasy alliance
and Mars took the name of war.

But sometimes, when time chokes,
a white dot in the echo of darkness
winks from existence.
Like someone clasped their fingers over an ember
a million years ago and yet now we know about it.

What happens to those that saw it before us?

Those many who stand there on their planet
and watch as a star in their sky winks one last time.
Why did they not warn us?
Perhaps they do not see the same stars like us.
Not all skies are created equal.

What about those who see it after?

Do we hold responsibility for not telling them
of the star that once was and now forever will never be?
How many eyes in the sky do they see?
Perhaps they don't even notice the night sky.
Maybe we block out stars from them.
If we do, I hope we move.

Cold Quiet

If you stood on the edge of our Solar System
Past Earth, the moons of Mars, the Belt
And looked back on our sun
soon it would be just another star in the sky.

Does Space ever scare you?
Do you fear the hiss of oxygen
the breath of earth trapped in a bubble?
Destined to die under the stars.

Or do you relish the release of gravity
the undoing of weights strapped to legs?
Tearing effortlessly through space
the cold quiet comforted by humans.

When Venus finally falls into the sun,
is it a child falling into the arms of a mother?
The gas bubbling gently, cooing
a lullaby of sleep after eons awake.

Villanelle of End

Today, the earth didn't swirl
it stopped, brakes melting
So began the end of the world.

A great wind rose up, it hurled
leaves, great thousand mile hour
beasts, all the houses, they swirled.

The chimneys went first, curled
with fists full of smoke
tomorrow was the end of the world.

The great humans froze, burled
skin like ash trees
their futures swirled.

And so god twirled
his little pinky finger and pointed
at the end of the world.

The great sun purred.
The oceans slammed shut.
Watch-the skies swirled.
Today, it's the end of the world.

Caroline Fredette

Age: 15, Grade: 10

School Name: James River High School, Midlothian, VA

Educator: Michael McCarthy

Category: Short Story

The Vermillion Fire

The Vermillion Fire

Carriages. All that I have been awoken by for the last two weeks. I will be peacefully engulfed within my slumber when I hear horses' neighs and whinnies. Do they forget that castle walls are anything but sound-proof? I take a moment to peer out my window. The weather is splendid. The sky is a light azure, not a cloud to be seen. The leaves have all turned various shades of crimson and marigold. I can feel the cool, Autumn breeze kiss my cheeks whenever the wind blows. I redirect my eyes from the distant horizon down to the cobblestone. As I look around I notice my sister Margaret. She is fastened in a silver, silk court dress. The entire gown is adorned with gold lace, while the sleeves have embroidered embellishments. Her dandelion-colored hair has been put in a stylish up-do. This feels quite abnormal to me because it isn't like her to dress up like this on any ordinary day; then it hits me. Today is Margaret's coronation day. When father passed away last year, she became next in line for the throne.

I can feel envy beginning to grow internally. My sister, even though she is younger, has always been deemed more superior than I, especially by my now late father. He always believed she held more poise, more beauty, and more femininity. His final wish upon his death bed was for her to lead rather than I. The lone person I felt ever understood me was my mother. My mother was just like me. She shared my hot temper, my longing for adventure; even my fiery, auburn hair. Everyone adored my mother. She was the kindest, most caring, and strongest person anyone had ever met. She passed when giving birth to Margaret; I was about to turn four. Ever since that day, the people around me have completely shifted their attitude. I feel as though me being so similar to her is just a constant reminder of her being gone. Therefore, my sister has always been perceived as "greater" than I. My budding envy has now blossomed into a modest, emerald flame. Margaret has never had to persevere to earn anything. Affection, loyalty, friendship; they have all simply been handed to her. It isn't fair. I lost the closest person to me, yet I'm the one to be punished. I don't understand. What wrongdoings have I committed?

I start to recollect my thoughts and begin to get ready for the day. I look at my gown I'm wearing to the ceremony today. It's vermilion, the bane of my existence. When my sister and father would tease and torment me, I would attempt to stand up for myself. Due to this, they came up with a sobriquet for me. Vermillion fire. Oh, how they antagonized me with that nickname. Whenever I made an effort to express myself and my emotions, they would use it to shut me up. "Oh, here goes vermillion fire blabbing on again." Those words forever live in my mind. In fact, I don't even remember the last time they called me by my real name.

Before I know it, I'm dressed. I look in my floor-length mirror and I feel a strong animosity. Besides the color that is blatantly mocking me, the dress doesn't make me feel like myself. I've never been one for elegance. A knock at the door startles me out of my drawn out gaze. It's Charles, one of the many butlers here at the castle. "I apologize for bothering you Clara, but the ceremony is starting soon. I suggest you head down to the abbey." He uses his hand to gesture out into the hallway. I listen to his suggestion and begin the lengthy walk down to the Abbey.

The closer I draw near, the harder it becomes to breathe. I cannot tell if it's from my fear or my corset. I settle on it being a bit of both. As we approach, I can see just how many people went out of their way to see my sister crowned. It frustrates me knowing that they are unaware of just how cruel of a person she truly is. Charles looks at me.

"Whatever you do, don't mess this up," he whispers to me. "You have to make your father proud. You and your sister are a direct representation of him. If your father's legacy is destroyed, we all know who's fault it is." Before I have the chance to digest what was just explained to me, I am ushered into the building.

The entire coronation goes by in a blur. The entire time, I feel like I'm walking on a tightrope; one wrong move and it's over for me. I can only focus on people. So many people. People that I cannot afford to let down. As the

audience heads to the ballroom for the afterparty, my sister, a few members of the royal staff, and I stay behind. Margaret, now officially the Queen, turns towards me.

"This is tearing you up inside. I can just tell," she squeals at me. I can feel my cheeks burning. That emerald flame from earlier is back now with a vengeance.

"Goodness me, is Miss Vermillion Fire embarrassed?" She begins to cackle.

A sliver of bravery pops up inside of me. "You and I both know you did not deserve or earn that crown," I hiss.

"Manipulating people into resenting me may have worked for a while, but it won't anymore. I refuse to tolerate it anymore."

Margaret looks appalled. I have never stood up to her before, at least not this assertively. I notice a throbbing, blue vein starting to bulge out of her forehead, but she doesn't look visibly angry. She walks up to me to the point where our noses are almost touching.

She leans over and whispers in my ear "You are going to regret doing that." I watch her strut away, knowing she is formulating a plan in her mind to get back at me for the words I had spoken to her. Begrudgingly, I amble over to the ballroom. Although it felt like Hell, the ceremony was decorated beautifully. Everywhere you look, you can see an array of poppies and orchids; all in various colors. The color added from the autumn trees just makes the scenery even more attractive. Eventually, I am met with the entrance to the ballroom. I can tell by the muffled hustle-and-bustle coming from inside that I am one of the last people to arrive. As soon as I walk in the door, all eyes are glued on me. I notice my sister is standing up on a platform, grinning at me. The vein in her forehead is still there; it's bulging. Whatever is going on here, it certainly cannot be good.

"Ah, Clara, so glad to see that you could join us," she says to me, keeping her jaw clenched.

"Wha-what's going on here Margaret?" I ask; although I know I don't really want an answer.

Margaret's face turns from a terrorizing grin into pure outrage. "That's Your Highness to you!" she scolds. A hush falls over the crowd until the entire room goes silent. I can hear her words echoing off the wall. They're trying to penetrate my soul. After the echo stops, she hops off the platform and briskly walks towards me.

"You see Miss Vermillion Fire, now that Mother and Father are gone and I'm the Queen, we don't need you around anymore." I furrow my brow, trying to figure out what she means by this. She notices my confusion and decides to clarify. She turns away from me so she is facing the majority of our guests.

"Attention everybody! I would like to announce my first act as Queen. I declare Princess Clara Cooper of the Longmore Kingdom to be wed to Sir Fredrick Hale of the Colmont Kingdom." Her hand gestures to a man standing in the corner of the room.

He looks to be about 40 years older than I. That isn't even the worst of it. The Kingdom of Colmont is about a month long trip from here. Here. My home. I can't leave the place I've grown up to be wed to a man old enough to be my father. I walk over to Margaret and firmly grab her by the arm. We make direct eye contact.

"You can't do this to me Margaret! Father wouldn't force me to marry a man I don't love, let alone a man I've never met" I can see the smile behind her eyes. She did this on purpose. I questioned her authority at the Abbey. She needed to prove to me that she had what it takes. My emerald spark has returned.

"Margaret, we all know that you are not fit to be queen. You are just a jealous child who only can get joy from the suffering of others." After the words slip out of my mouth, it hits me that we are in front of a crowd.

Everyone has reacted differently to the situation. Some are laughing, some are gasping, some have no reaction at all. All I know is that I didn't learn my lesson from before. Margaret's eyes are filled with rage. Trying to hold her composure, she gets three sentences out to me.

"All decisions I make are final. It happened to mom, it'll happen to you. Now I think it will be best if you leave the ballroom Vermillion Fire." She walks away from me. Just like that. I'm being exiled from my own kingdom. The kingdom that I am supposed to rightfully be ruling. No. I refuse.

The small flame that was inside of me before has turned into an inferno. It has taken control of my entire being. I can't think straight. All I knew was one thing, I wasn't going to be sent away. I run as fast as my corset would allow. Eventually, I arrived at my room. I practically ripped my party gown off. Still in my undergarments, I run around the castle collecting as many candles as I can.

I whisper to myself "If she wants to see vermillion fire, fine. She's got her fire."

My impulse has completely taken over. I can't feel anything other than *fire*. Before my conscience stops me, I lock the ballroom doors, set the candles up, light them, then knock them over. In a blink, the entire carpet has caught on fire. All of the pent up anger and frustration my sister has put me through is finally coming out. As I run away from the mess I've caused, I start to hear the first scream. Soon enough, I hear the wails and cries of all the party guests here to support our 'beloved queen.' My eyes are glued to the castle. In just a few minutes, most of it has gone up in flames. One by one, the screaming and begging begins to stop until it's totally silent. The last scream I hear is of Margaret's. It ricochet's through my ears.

"Please god save me! I apologize for my sins!"

Margaret loved her vermillion fire, so I gave it to her. Hearing her fear what she's used to degrade me is what I've always needed. I am the true leader. I am the heir to the throne. I am the one you should all fear. All remorse I should be feeling right now has been replaced with pleasure. No longer shall I be tattooed by the vermillion fire.

Kyndle Fuller

Age: 15, Grade: 10

School Name: Appomattox Regional Governor's School, Chesterfield, VA

Educator: Cindy Cunningham

Category: Personal Essay & Memoir

The Fine Art of Feeling

The Fine Art of Feeling

Well, really, not feeling at all. Feelings are hard, complicated, and overwhelming. Why express them when you can simply hide them from everything. Why risk yourself getting hurt when you don't need to speak?

Feelings have always been a touchy subject for me. I avoid saying how I really feel as much as possible. When something doesn't affect me I am as blunt as can be. When it does affect me, when it's about me, I don't know what to say. I'm incapable of talking. It's like my throat closes up, my heart beats uncontrollably, I get sweaty palms. A cliché coming true. It's almost pathetic how much I avoid it.

I'm one of those girls who really want a boyfriend. Moaning and groaning about it all the time. The second a boy shows interest in me I couldn't want one less. It's not necessarily that I don't like him. It's the *idea* of feeling. Sharing my emotions. Telling someone how I feel. It's the concept of it I cannot wrap my mind around. It literally makes me want to throw up.

I enjoy listening to Taylor Swift constantly. As I am writing this, I am listening to Taylor Swift. She writes her emotions and then sings them for millions of people to hear. It seems effortless. For example, her album *Lover*. It's all about her current relationship and how she is over all the drama on the internet. I wish I could be that fearless.

How could someone so easily explain how they feel? Let their emotions run wild? I overthink and that could be a problem. I let my mind run wild. This doesn't work in my favor. Always being suspicious and conserved. It's hard to open up, even to my best friend sometimes. I know she won't judge me, but there is always something that holds me back for the big things.

I keep the biggest things to myself. I let myself overthink it. How would I say it? What would their reaction be? Why would they care? I can't find any reason other than I would feel better. That isn't the only reason I should have for telling anyone anything.

I think it's because I try to look at the logic of things. I'm one of those people that when they ask what time it is, they want to know the exact time. I don't want a rounded time, if it's 9:55, tell me that, not 10 o'clock. Same things for numbers. If the number is 8.57, that's what I want to hear. The logical side of me is the reason I hold back, I think. It tells me "no" even when I want to say "yes." Sometimes I want to just tell someone everything, every little thing, that is on my mind. Things I've contemplated for years, months, or even minutes. When it is lighthearted I say it then and there. I often call my best friend just to tell her what random thought just popped up in my head. Some things I think about for extended periods of time before I even think about sharing. The depth of the thought and how painful it could be for me really decides what I say.

I also have trust issues, what a surprise. In my case, though, it's not necessarily because someone has hurt me. It's my own thoughts. I don't particularly like the idea of not knowing someone's reaction. When it's hard to read someone, know their reaction, I get scared. It may take me awhile to open up to certain people because they are unreadable. I have been told my eyes are blank. I'm not one of those people that if you look into their eyes you can tell how they're feeling. I also don't make faces. Sometimes, I don't react. I hate when other people are like that, though. Super contradictory and hypocritical. I don't like the feeling of not knowing exactly what other people are thinking, but I rarely share my real opinion.

I've learned that hiding what you are feeling can really help in certain situations. They make them better. That's why I do it, at least that's what I tell myself sometimes. I do it to make things easier for everyone, not just myself. In the end, I don't think it really helps me. Maybe that's okay. People say if you bottle everything up then you'll just explode. Maybe I'll tell someone everything one day, maybe I never will. Honestly, I think all I can do is hope I don't explode, because feelings are hard, complicated, and overwhelming. It's just easier to not feel at all.

Keyana Gardner

Age: 18, Grade: 12

School Name: Manchester High School, Midlothian, VA

Educator: Rebecca Lynch

Category: Short Story

1941

She had just come back from the soup kitchen. A paper bag of loaves in hand. That was all they'd had today. By the time she had gotten off work there was no more soup and even the misshapen vegetables had gone. She'd take what she could get, it had been a while since the five of them had anything to eat. It'd been even longer for her, she'd only eaten what was left of the small whole chicken they'd gotten from the church some days ago. When she came in she didn't hear the laughter of her children, but instead the staticky sound of music on the old radio.

"Chauncy? Chauncy, where are the children?" she called to him.

He didn't answer. He sat quietly in his armchair thumbing through stacks of bills. The entirety of the house was quiet. She didn't hear her son Jamie's footsteps as he ran through the house nor did she hear the giggles of her little Ann. Then she thought of it, maybe they were sleeping or playing in the backyard.

What she didn't know is where he'd been earlier. Just hours before she'd arrived home he found himself in the city. He made his way into a hole in the wall speakeasy beneath Carlin's Furniture. It was there that he got word of a certain predicament, one that they could profit from. As he sat sipping on some cheap watery bourbon he overheard the loud drunken chatter of *the* Jameson Wilder in a corner booth.

It was there that he made a deal with a half-drunk Jameson Wilder, giving his children up for five hundred dollars. That evening when he came home he fed his children what little else they had at the house and dressed them in their nicest clothes. A sleek black Model J arrived in front of his house and it was then he knew he made the right choice. They were going to live with a better family, a richer family.

She finally came into the sitting room and asked again, "Chauncy, where are our children?"

He wiped at his mouth with the back of his hand, "They're gone Elizabeth. Gone somewhere with someone who can actually care for 'em."

"Chauncy," she looked at him in disbelief, "Chauncy those are our children."

"Were," he chuckled before taking another swig of his drink.

Tears began to run down her cheeks, "How could you Chauncy?!"

"We needed the money Elizabeth. I see no sense in them starving to death while we try to get it."

"I had just managed to get something this evening. We-we were all going to have something to eat."

"Yeah, if weeks old bread slathered in lard counts as eatin' then sure," he groused.

"Are you hearing yourself right now? You *sold* our children, Chauncy. Things are rough, but I'd like to think we hadn't sunk so low," she said indignantly.

He scoffed, "Rough is an understatement, my dear. Livin' like this might as well be hell. And I finally made some money, now you can go and buy yourself somethin' pretty and quit alla this working you been doin'."

“You of all people should know I couldn’t care less about money, Chauncy! I was born poor or did you forget? Money and pretty things don’t mean nothin’ to me. I would’ve sold everything in this house and sat in the dark before I ever considered doing what you’ve done today.”

“Well then tell me Liz, tell me, what would you have had me to do, huh? I can’t keep a job, I can’t do anything. It’s pathetic!”

"Everybody’s been losing their jobs Chauncy. Everybody, not just you !”

“Well I’m not everybody, Liz! I was a businessman for god sakes! I wasn’t going to go beg in the streets like some *pauper*.”

“You’re right, you’re not everybody. You’re sorry. You’re a sorry, selfish somebody. You most definitely aren’t the man I remember marrying.”

“If wanting to have things in life makes me sorry then I guess I am, but what’s done is done. I can’t take it back. Now c’mere, sit down.”

“No Chauncy! And-and y’know what, I’m leavin’ ”.

“You wouldn’t,” he sneered.

“I wouldn’t?”

“S’not like you got anywhere to go. We’re in the middle of a depression”

He turned from her and took another drink. She ran up the stairs and closed herself in the first room she came upon. It was her little girl’s room. Her little Ann was gone. All of her things were gone too. The only things left were her little crib and the small tattered bear she’d loved so much. Elizabeth sank to the floor as sobs wracked her body.

“Mama’s so sorry darlings,” she cried to herself as she held the discarded bear in her hands.

When she woke again it was dark outside. She got up and rushed to the room she shared with her husband. She pulled a clunky old suitcase from the shelf in the closet and piled in whatever clothes she could get her hands on. When she had finished she wrapped her long woolen coat around herself and made her way back downstairs. She saw that Chauncy had fallen asleep in the little arm chair so she crept past him. She stopped just in the door frame before she left and muttered, “My Mama was right about you Chauncy Graves, I really didn’t know a thing about you.”

That night she would leave New York, she walked for hours to get to the city before stumbling down a steep hill and into the train depot. She crept alongside the still freight cars looking for one that was open. She hoisted herself inside and nearly screamed at what she saw. Sat in the corner of the freight car were 4 young men, no older than 17.

“Aw, c’mon hush now. The railroad police’ll hear ya.”

She collected herself, “Sorry.”

“Good Lord, act like ya never seen a coupla bums before.”

“Um-where’s this train headed?” she asked.

“Leaves for Nebraska any minute now. And get an apple or two why don’tcha. You’re lookin’ right thin, and that’s comin’ from me,” said the scrawniest of the bunch.

She took an apple from the opened crate and settled in the opposite corner. She was going home to her mother in Oklahoma. At least there she'd have something more to eat. She took a bite from the apple and laid her head against the wooden boards of the freightcar, watching though the small slats as the world passed by. As she sat there, she thought of her kids somewhere out there, all alone. And she only hoped that they were at least together.

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When she arrived in Oklahoma she walked for miles before finally hitching a ride with an older woman. The woman was nice enough, but she left Elizabeth with strange advice.

"You best get somethin' to cover up those eyes. The storms we got 'round here ain't no joke, honey."

When she arrived at her childhood home she was shocked to see what was in its place. It wasn't the neat little blue house she remembered, but instead a dull, dilapidated shack. She stood there for a while until a woman sauntered out and came to meet her. It was her mother. She didn't look as she had when she'd left all those years ago. She wasn't the strong older woman Elizabeth remembered. She looked so frail and when she coughed it seemed to rattle her entire body.

"You shouldn't have come," her mother rasped.

"Mama, I thought-I thought you'd be happy to see me."

"I am Lizzy, I am. There's so much dust," she said lowly, "And what of the children? It's been so long since I last saw them."

Elizabeth only shook her head, "That's a story for later," she said, knowing full well she had no intentions of telling her mother what went on in New York.

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Elizabeth spent the months that followed with her mother in their old ramshackle house. She'd taken apart the shed in the backyard to try and fix the house up a little, it didn't do very much. Still, the wind blew in through the slats and dust collected on the window sill. The only good thing that came of her return was that she had something to eat. The fruits and vegetables that her mother had preserved kept them both fed. Sadly, while it seemed the color had returned to her cheeks, it only seemed to leave her mother's day by day.

One night in particular her mother's fits were especially bad. Her mother tried to assure her that she'd be fine, but Elizabeth didn't buy it. She turned on her side and tried to sleep, but she couldn't. Her mother's harsh, ragged breaths kept her awake.

In the morning when she woke she saw her mother was still sleeping beside her. Her mother always got up before the sun, just not today.

She shook her mother gently, "Mama, Mama wake up."

Her mother didn't wake up. When she put her ear to her mother's chest she didn't hear anything. Not a breath and not a beat. She looked over her mother who lay silent, her lips quirked in a small smile.

"Mama, stop horsing around. It's not funny," she said, shaking her mother again.

"Mama?" she cried, her voice cracking.

That afternoon she went into town to try and arrange a funeral for her mother. She didn't have any money, but she offered up some valuables that had belonged to her mother and one thing of her own. She wanted her mother to have as good a burial service that she could get. She traded several jars of preserves, a sterling silver teapot, and a fur. It was enough to get her a pine box, hire a grave digger, and have a priest come speak.

That night she laid on the floor and just cried. She cried for herself and for her family. She felt so lost and she was plagued by thoughts of what had become of Jamie and her little Ann. She wanted to go home, but she didn't know where home was anymore. She lay there for what felt like hours, when she finally got up she turned on her mother's old radio hoping to hear a song that would cheer her up. It did just the opposite. When Jimmie Davis' *You are My Sunshine* came on the radio she was reduced to tears all over again, but she didn't turn it off.

She sank to the floor and mumbled the words to the song through a bout of tears, "Sunshine....you are my sunshine....you make me happy when skies are gray....please don't take my sunshine away."

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It wouldn't be until years later that she returned to New York in 1941. She arrived with only the clothes on her back and not a cent to her name. As she stepped off the train she heard a voice call out to her. She spun around quickly. She knew that voice. Even on the crowded train platform she knew that was the voice of her little Jamie.

When she turned she was surprised at what she saw. He was well kept and his blonde locks were no longer a mass of curls, but slicked and parted. He looked so different from the scrawny boy she remembered. His clothes fit him nicely, they didn't hang off his frame like they used to. But there was something else, his eyes. They were dull and sad. They didn't hold that same mirth they had when he was a little boy. She was happy to see that he looked so well, but she felt angry too. She was angry at herself for not being able to stop Chauncy from giving them away and she was angry that she couldn't give them the life they deserved.

"Mama?" the voice called out to her again

"Yes," the two women answered at the same time.

"Mama's right there," a little girl said, pointing to the woman who stood next to them. Elizabeth looked down and there standing next to James was her little Ann. When she heard Ann speak, her heart broke. Ann had grown so much since the last time she'd seen her, but worst of all she'd forgotten her. She was too young to remember anyone else having ever been her mother.

Elizabeth looked over at the woman and then she recognized her. It was Paula Wilder, a wealthy woman from Bronxville. The other secretaries in the office used to talk about her, or more specifically her husband, major stock trader, Augustus Wilder. She looked well, as she always had. Looking down at her own clothes she began to feel somewhat self-conscious. Here was this woman, wearing the prettiest plum colored hat and a-line dress while she wore an old faded day dress and patched coat that had belonged to her mother.

"No, that's Mama" he said, dropping his sister's hand and running towards his mother.

"Jameison! Jameison, you get back here now!" Paula yelled after him.

Her stomach turned when she heard the woman call her son Jameison. That wasn't his name. Still the boy paid her no mind and rushed into his mother's arms. They hugged for the first time in four years.

She kissed the top of his head and held him tight, "I've missed you, Jamie." she said.

"I miss you Mama," he mumbled into her coat.

Then suddenly he was pulled from her. Paula took him by the collar of his vest and pulled him away. Before they left she and Paula locked eyes. Paula's eyes grew wide and just for a second a glimmer of recognition passed over her face. She knew her eyes, she knew her, afterall Jamie was the spitting image of his mother.

Paula turned away and as they walked farther from her Elizabeth could hear her harshly reprimanding him for talking to strangers. Elizabeth wanted to confront her, but the words were stuck in her throat. She couldn't bring herself to do it, she was no good for them anyhow. A tear fell from her eye as she saw them disappear into the crowd at the station, and she prayed that one day she would see them again.

Aseye Gatty

Age: 13, Grade: 8

School Name: St Catherine's School, Richmond, VA

Educator: Julie Elmore

Category: Short Story

On My Way Home

On Our Way Home

It feels wrong. Living like this, I mean. It has felt wrong for the past 17.6 years. But, I don't tell people. I could get sent to the Government if I told anybody, *anybody*. They're ruthless. They can kill. I've seen it happen first-hand.

Hybridity takes away the human in me. My lungs, replaced with heavy metal plates. My brain, a supercomputer. A chip is inserted into the back of my neck that monitors my levels and gives me direction. Much of the human functioning in me has been stripped away. My muscles have been injected at birth so that they grow rapidly, leaving me with a "perfect" body. I still have fundamental traits, like my curly black hair, or my large, muscular hands. At times, I just don't want to be this mess of a mechanically enhanced body. I want to get out. I want to run, to swim, to *live*.

Guess what? I can't.

I have one friend. A girl, Astrid. We walk home every day together after Downloading. We live in the same pod unit, the equivalent to a human subdivision. Astrid is extremely nerdy, and she tends to talk a *lot*. Ever since I can remember, she's been this huge ball of energy, going around stating random facts about whatever's on her mind each day. To be honest, we're nothing alike. That's what we like about each other though, our differences.

Some human scientist once said that "opposites attract." I like that. I guess the human in me still feels. It still wants to attract and to be attracted.

Downloading today was boring, as always. It's like school, human school. We sit and stare and sigh for several hours, while our chips are re-coded for the day's duties. Today, I got Border Duty with Astrid. After Downloading, I walk down to the border with Astrid, and we climb the tree to watch the children playing near it, making sure they don't attempt to cross. There is an elevator to get to the lookout, but climbing makes me feel alive. We sit high in the tree, and watch the human children play in the mud. I catch Astrid looking at me with a knowing smirk. I pretend not to notice her. I watch the small human faces light up as they get their hands dirty, as they laugh at their friends, as they swing from tree branches like Earth's natural monkey bars. I used to be one of them.

Used to.

It's dark. Astrid and I walk home from Border Duty. We don't speak. No words are needed, really. My brain replays today's visions over and over and over in my head. Astrid catches my smiling to myself and I immediately fix my expression to one of feigned seriousness.

"I'm going to remove my chip. I want to become human again," I said after a while. She stops walking. Her face is hard. Firm. She looks around, and then replies hushedly, "Xander," She says my name softly, almost a whisper. "Please, please, just, stop talking about—" I stop her before she can finish her sentence.

"I'm sorry. I really am, okay? I can't help it. Look at them, Astrid, and then look at us. We're better off human, and you know it. I can't go on like this. I hate it. I hate it. I can't breathe, I can't feel, I can't live, I hate it this— It's just... I just can't." Astrid looks wounded. Tears build up, more and more, spilling out through the corners. A river. They wet my uniform, and I let them. I let them take over and ruin and dampen and spill out and destroy.

I don't even care.

We don't speak the rest of the walk back to our sleeping quarters. We do not say goodnight. We do not look at each other. We break into millions of pieces, and we do not tell each other.

It's been three days and I have not spoken to Astrid. We do not get picked to do our daily tasks together anymore. We do not look at each other as we walk home from Downloading today. I want to apologize, but I don't. I count the pods we pass on our walk. 27, 28, 29. She says it first.

"Xander, I'm sorry, okay? I really am." 34, 35, 36. She tries again. "Please, okay? I just don't want you to get hurt." 41, 42, 43, 44.

It's silent for a long time before I respond with, "I know. I know, and I'm sorry too, Astrid. You are my best and only friend and I don't want to ever lose you." We stop walking and she keeps her head down. I want to console her, to hug her, but I can't. My hands hang limply at my sides until we reach our pod unit. "Xander, listen to me," Astrid rushes out. I wait for her to elaborate. "I've been thinking a lot about what you said about becoming human. I want to. I want to go with you. I want to have fun, and, and be free. I want it to be *us*. Just us. I want to go and—"

Tears blur my vision, and I'm smiling as I say, "Shut up, Astrid. Just, shut up." I hug her to my chest, enveloping her in gratitude. When she hugs me back, everything feels right and good and real. It feels almost human. Astrid has the goofiest smile as she walks home to her pod, and I'm pretty sure I mirror her expression exactly.

The other members from my pod are already home. Mother prepares the Government-provided tasteless cardboard of a meal. Father is still at work. As a Government Official, we do not see much of him. He's always working late nights. I don't complain about it. No one does. My brother is in his quarters, watching the holo-vision. There's only one channel, Government-provided as well. After greeting them and eating the food Mother tried so very hard to revive, I head to my sleeping quarters. Astrid face-calls me on the glass pad mounted on my wall. We talk for hours, longer than we have in a long time, planning our escape from our Hybrid society. We pack our bags, write farewell notes to our parents, and get ready for the big day ahead.

The Government listens to our *every word*.

I wake up disoriented. My mind is racing, thinking of our jail-break tonight. I quickly get dressed for Downloading, having slept through the many alarms set the night before. I rush out the door, catching up to Astrid so we can walk together. I was hoping we'd get picked for our task together, but I got Janitorials. She didn't. After downloading, we head our separate ways. The day blurs by, and I hardly notice when the work day is over.

It's night. Dark. Quiet. Astrid and I carry our bags full of ration bowls and filtered water carriers. We carry our changes of clothes and our hope for a new life. A human life.

My parents, I don't want to think of them, but I do. I don't want to think of their contorted faces when they realize I'm not coming home, ever. I do not want to think of their broken spirits when they read my farewell note left for them on my bed. "I love you," I whisper to the unsleeping night. "I love you more than you will ever, ever know." Astrid and I walk to the border. Our steps are quiet. The euphoria from the thought of leaving this place is too much, so much that it makes me feel guilty. I hold Astrid's hand. I shouldn't be touching her like this, but I do anyway. Her hand is cold, shaky. I squeeze it, and we near the border together. We climb the tree near the border, not wanting to set off any alarms. We sit on the threshold for an eternity, trying to gain the strength to leave our old life behind. Astrid cries into my shoulder. The muscles in my arm muffle the sound she makes as she cries. I can't bear the sound she makes. "When we leave," I whisper to Astrid, "I will be a boy. I will be a *human* boy, all because of you. It will be just me and you out there, Astrid. We will be our own family. We will be together forever. I promise you, Astrid. I will never leave you. I love you. Do you know that, Astrid?" Her crying falters. She pulls away from my chest, leaving a wet smudge just above my stomach. She smiles, mending my broken heart just a little.

"You ready?" I ask.

She places her hand on my cheek, a human gesture. She replies, "I'm ready, Xander. I've *always* been ready." We descend the border, careful not to trip any hidden alarms. We land safely on the other side. We turn around. We face our hopeful future. Numerous guns are pointed at our heads, held by Government Officials. I squeeze my eyes shut, open, shut, open. They're still here, I'm still here, Astrid is still crying.

They lead us back to the Hybrid side of the border. They prod the small of my back with their guns. They instruct Astrid to stop crying. They order me to walk faster. I am numb to it all. We reach the Government building. They

take us to two different cells to await our future.

We've been waiting for hours. None of us speak. The metal pins drilled into my legs begin to lock up after sitting for so long. Astrid shakes in the corner, too terrified to cry. I want so much to touch her, to kiss her forehead. I look across the hall to her cell, watching her stare blankly into space. Her chip is shutting down. I watch her die inside, and I can't do anything about it. A large, burly, hooded figure enters Astrid's cell. I limp to the edge of my cell, struggling against the chain tethered to my foot to watch the events unfold. A Glock is pulled from the hooded figure's jacket pocket. He raises it to Astrid's chest. She does not look up at the figure. She shuts her eyes and moves her arm from her chest in acceptance of her fate. I watch silently. I don't move, don't flinch as he pulls the trigger.

The man moves towards me. He takes off his hood, revealing two glinting black eyes. He grins a horrible, toothy smile. He nears my cell and spits, "No one leaves here. *Ever*. You're lucky to be an official's son, otherwise *that* would've been you." He points his gun toward Astrid's stiffened body. "Nice try, boy." He walks away with one last ugly smirk gleaming with saliva. I remain unflinching though the stench of his breath lingers for a moment after he leaves. I sit in shock for an eternity, processing everything.

Astrid is dead. Because of me? No, not because of me, It can't be because of me. It can't, but it is, it is. This is my fault. Not anybody else's. *Me*. Astrid is dead because of *me*. She will never smile again because of *me*. She will never see the light of day because of *me*. The word makes me sick. Adrenaline pulses through my blood and I let out a hoarse scream. I punch the concrete floors with my bare hands. Over and over and over again. Blood spurts from my knuckles and I keep going. My hands bleed out, but the pain is not enough. *They took Astrid from me. She's gone and she'll never come back.* My screams come out hoarse and ragged, one more desperate than the other. *She was right here, right here with me.* The tears burn my eyes, a poison running down my face *Why did they do this to me?* My breath comes out shaky and uncontrolled. *Why am I still alive? Why does she have to die? Why didn't they take me instead?* I can't stop the thoughts from flooding in. My chip is overheating, I can feel it burning in the back of my head. My hands are shaky and cold as I dig my nails into my arm, trying to wake myself from this nightmare. My hand comes away with blood. I throw myself against the floor and I feel pain spring from somewhere deep inside me. It spreads through my body and blankets me in self-loathing. It's suffocating, this agony. But the pain feels so good, so right. It tortures me. I cry out curses, pleads, anything to suppress my suffering. Agonizing waves of guilt crash over my head, repeatedly crushing me against the frigid cell floor. Blood paints the floor and my uniform a deep, disturbing red. I lie on the floor, and I sob into it. I cry until my lungs are set on fire, burning, and aching. The exhaustion from crying puts me to sleep. There I lay, on the cold, wet floor, surrounded in my own blood and tears.

Grief reveals herself in different ways. I used to think she would go away after enough time had passed, but she never truly did. She fades into the background hum of everyday life. But, every once in a while, she presents herself to you again, reminding you that it's never really okay, that you can't forget about her. She's selfish in that way. Grief pulls you back into reality just when you think you're getting over her.

I loved Astrid more than anything in this messed-up world. I loved the joy she brought me, I loved her lopsided grin and her horrible jokes. I miss our moments watching the human children play in the mud. I'm tired of patching up the hole she left, pretending that she's not dead, pretending that she didn't get killed in front of me. I didn't want to live in a world without her. I wanted to die myself. But now, I want to live for the both of us. I want to laugh and love and feel because Astrid can't. I owe it to her to live my life to the fullest. I *will* become human.

I'm on my way home, Astrid.

I'll make sure our wildest dreams come true.

Lauryn Giddings

Age: 17, Grade: 12

School Name: Appomattox Regional Governor's School, Chesterfield, VA

Educator: Patty Smith

Category: Novel Writing

To Kill a Rose

Brief summary:

Inspired by my own unpublished trilogy, this literary piece focuses on a character named Catherine and her experiences as a descendent from an escape slave, black girl, and supernatural in England. At the beginning of this literary piece, Catherine is found running through the woods. Her memories are coming back of how she had killed her parent's murders by using her magical abilities that prior to this incident, was unknown to her. The story goes into the past where Catherine goes on to talk about how her grandmother was a descendent from a slave ship and how she managed to escape off of the ship after it had been damaged and sent back to England for inspection. There, her descendants lived in Normsland where they worked as severely underpaid paid servants for various wealthy households. The Addicott household that Catherine and her mother, Bethsaida, are currently working for treat them horribly. Florence Addicott has four daughters: Amelia, Bronwyn, Marian, and Adeline. Amelia, the youngest out of the Addicotts loves Catherine despite her race. Bronwyn, the oldest, is more racist to Catherine than her mother is. At the end of the story, Florence Addicott calls authorities on Catherine and her family for being illegal immigrants and descendants of a runaway slave. The end of the story brings the reader back to the present where the authorities that killed her parents are slain by Catherine's unorthodox magic. The story ends as Catherine running through the woods, contemplating what she had just done.

Excerpt:

They're dead and it's all because of me.

Anger boiled in my veins as my feet quickly carried me through the woods. My footsteps in the snow were just pointers to where I had escaped from the white men. My breathing shuttered in and out of my lungs as goosebumps coated my arms. I had left without a coat; *it's not like I even had one.* I would never be able to afford a nice coat like the one my grandmother once gifted me.

I would work in the manors of the wealthy from sunrise until it was dark and would barely have enough to eat to feel satisfied. "*Your payment is your existence right here in England, Catherine!*" A woman scolded me as I stood at the door waiting for the few pence that I had earned. I once cleaned her house and washed her four daughters' pleated, ivory skirts and made their long, golden hair into tight curls. "*Just wait till they find out that a slave escaped that ship decades ago! They'll find out if you keep asking for pence!*" I had to survive somehow; nobody would hire a *negro*, *much less a negro woman*. My father was blessed enough to have been hired at a factory where he would work on the lowest floor where no one would notice him. We were undocumented in this country and if one white man had gotten angry at us, they would turn us in.

I had heard of the slavery that had occurred in the Americas and how millions of Africans were torn from their homes to be whipped and worked to death. My grandmother was one of those Africans who had been taken and was boarded on a ship. As the ship was leaving Africa, it had hit something unknown in the water and they had to return to England for a new ship before the damage worsened.

On their arrival, my grandmother was able to escape into England with a few others and lived in a small village where some accepted them. She lived to tell me the tale of our heritage and taught me words from her tribe. She would smile as bright as diamonds and her dark brown eyes had experienced more adventure, love, and despair than most would ever witness.

Thankfully, she had died before my parents did; therefore she wouldn't have had to witness the horrors that we endured. Someone had told the government that some *negroes* were in the village of Normsland and that we were undocumented. The white men had come to take my parents and me away the very evening that we had planned to

leave silently from the village. They snatched the wrist of my mother and father and dragged them along the ground, whispering racial slurs as they resisted.

I'd remember the hot tears and the sweat that dripped down my forehead as I tried to pull my parents away from the white mens' grasp only to be kicked aside and smacked across the face. My mother cried as she begged for them to stop when she saw the glinting revolver one of the men pulled from his pocket. The deafening sound of the bullet shattering their skulls buzzed into my eardrums. My head throbbed and my scream was torn from the repeated throbbing locked in my head. People came to watch the scene as I stood up sobbing and choking on my tears. "I wish you'd just drop dead!" I hollered. As if God himself had heard me, the men had dropped to the ground dead. Darkness began to pour into my sight as I fell to the ground.

I murdered some men.

They're all dead because of me.

Lauryn Giddings

Age: 17, Grade: 12

School Name: Appomattox Regional Governor's School, Chesterfield, VA

Educator: Patty Smith

Category: Short Story

Mother's Book of Spells

"Boy! *You-*" Jackson Moore's slurred words were a plastic beaded necklace that was falling apart. A lump of fear sat frozen in my throat. I did my best to prevent the tears that threatened a grande appearance on my face. "*You stay right there! I'm gonna come back, just you wait! I promise!*" He placed one foot in front of the other; his balance shifting back and forth like a small Christmas present shifting in a ridiculously large box. His tangled hair shimmered like raven feathers under the moonlight. His rough hands placed a Bodeo Handgun, Model 1889, in his pocket. He kept trudging through the snow; his feet seemed to be glued to the ground.

I watched him leave as the drunken mess he was. My hands were stained with my brother's blood. His name was Simon and was only a few years younger than me. It was so cold outside that my tears froze on my face. I brushed them off, shivering like a worn engine in a rustic great gatsby. Pushing back Simon's caramel hair out of his pasty white face, I wished that life would breath into him once more. I wished that he would sit up, brush off the snow caked on his jacket, and smile as if a bullet hadn't plunged into his small frame. I moved over to mother and father, just a few feet away from Simon. Their names were Dewis and Elizabeth and they were the most picturesque parents any child could ask for. I was too young to register the hate, loss, death, and grief that I had witnessed in a matter of a few hours. Hell, I hadn't witnessed death at all until this point. The one thing that I did understand was my hatred for Jackson Moore and how I promised to plot my sinister revenge on him later in life.

I was too scared to reap my revenge on Jackson now, despite his guard being let down thanks to his whiskey bottle. Jackson Moore could've twisted my neck and killed me in a matter of a few seconds. What was a supernatural little boy like me to do? Left out in the woods at seven years old? Left with the carcasses of his recently murdered mother, father, and younger brother?

Although Jackson promised to return, he never did. I always assumed that he had passed out somewhere. His words however, never left me. I would always be stricken with fear, night after night as a boy, that Jackson Moore would come to fulfill his promise. That night, I buried carcasses that I had known all too well. It took hours; I had to steal a shovel from a small cottage outside of Wayward Woods. Before I buried anyone, I took off their jackets and wrapped them around myself to keep me warm. The ground was solid rock as the tip of the shovel met its match. One large hole would have to do for three people. I aimed for 3 feet deep, 4 if I was lucky. Jackson's long speech he gave before he killed my family stuck in my head like the time Simon got bubblegum stuck in his hair.

"I promised," Jackson's breathing was disheveled. "I promised 'ol Connal Bennet that I'd kill his children with his own gun." He held up the Bodeo handgun and pointed it at my mother's face; his fingers brushing up against the trigger irresponsibly. His hatred was thicker than fog. "But grandchildren," a wicked smile matched his irrational blue eyes. "This is a sign from God, well," he let out a light chuckle, "only a sign if I believed in him. It's too bad that Connal isn't here to experience this. He died gracefully with age while my father bled to death in my very arms!" His bellowed with pain. "I lived a life continuing my father's work and despised despicable creatures, certainly ones with your abilities!" Spit flung from his lips like a spray bottle.

Jackson Moore complained for ten minutes of how much my grandfather was a spiteful man. My mother always told me stories of Connal and how he was one of the best guardians the Land of InBetween had. The Land of InBetween was the kingdom, where all supernaturals reside. Protected by a forcefield and its doors guarded in different areas throughout the world. The origin of all fairytales and magic was all rooted in the Land of InBetween; my grandfather was the best guardian that the royal family of the Land of InBetween haad ever had! Instead of protecting its doors, Connal went out in the human world and constantly protected supernaturals who didn't realize that they weren't human. He protected others from bad groups such as the Extermination of Supernatural Persons Incorporation that Jackson Moore's father had started. Bad people like Jackson Moore wreak havoc and death upon whoever they encounter. He leaves a mist of death from wherever he looms and a pit of hatred boils in his gut every waking morning.

I patted the snow and dirt on top of the large lump in the ground. Sitting next to the lump, letting sorrow and feeling alone ache my soul for hours, I remembered that mother's book of spells was in her coat pocket. She was one of the few people that could have two abilities instead of just one. "*When I was bullied*," mother would tell us a story every night. One story was about elves or how the short ones were extinct. Some were real, some were fake, and others were for us to figure out and decide. "*When I was bullied, I used my emotions to write spells. I was so angry at this one dear girl that I read them out loud for all to hear.*" She sucked in her teeth and laughed. "*Her hair fell out! Now I didn't mean to!*" She'd tried to defend herself from the wave laughter me and Simon couldn't control. Mother's hazel eyes would smile as she went in more detail about the story. She then finished it with, "*she was asking for it! What did she expect?*" I saw people as mother with two abilities as an enigma. Father and mother were able to transform to swans, and the rest of the bird folk often called them love birds. I could turn into a barn owl, just as grandfather could, and Simon turned into a finch like our great aunt Victoria.

The next day, I decided to leave this place and to never come back. I found a skinny tree and opened up my mother's journal that was falling apart and found a spell. She wrote this one for Simon and I so that we would have an extravagant playhouse. I spoke her words and the tree's body slowly grew thicker. It's roots rummaged through the earth like a slithering snake and its branches towered over my head. One branch that tapped my head was silver, the only silver branch out of all of the normal colored ones. It glistened lightly under the moonlight. I wrapped my fingers around it and pulled down on it.

A door appeared leading into a small home that looked larger on the inside than it did on the outside. Spiral stairs made out of the grain of the great tree's wood spun down to a living room, a small kitchen, and two bedrooms. The one to the left was usually Simon's, while the other was mine. It was empty, as it usually was besides the two beds and a cheap mattress on top. Perhaps I could later return to my house and retrieve some furniture or my prized possessions. Somehow, my mother gained immortality through her spells. She lived in the words I had spoken and in the swirls of this great tree. Simon was my brother and best friend and had no immortality, not to mention my father.

I crumbled onto the floor; my shoulders shuddering at every weap. Jackson Moore's promise may have been broken, but I make sure to keep mine.

Quáedyn Goins

Age: 14, Grade: 8

School Name: St Catherine's School, Richmond, VA

Educator: Julie Elmore

Category: Short Story

Paper Bag Brown

Paper Bag Brown

I don't wake up to the smell of breakfast in the morning. I wake up in a hurry to make it. I don't wake up well rested and content. I spend too much time at night doing their laundry. I do not own my own house or my own land. I am a slave.

The name that has been given to me is Athena Moore. I was born on April 9th in 1844. My mother is married to a man, but I don't look like that man. My father is white. I work inside while my mother labors out in the fields. She is the only one out there that favors me. I know why they don't like me. I know, yet she tells me "They are jealous-"

But I know.

They are my kind, she utters, "So my own kind doesn't want me." No response. I'm five years old when my life falls apart. My mother snuck into the Big House when she knew she wasn't allowed in. She kissed me, she hugged me, she cried. I'd never seen her cry before. Then she was gone.

By the time I was eight I began taking care of the Master's baby, Anna. They only let me touch her when I have to. I wonder why Mistress doesn't want to take care of her own baby, she never even looks at her. When I turned thirteen Anna was old enough to start schoolin'. Mistress would school her. I think it will be interesting to watch Mistress school a baby she's never known, almost as if it is all for show. Anna has grown to hate me. I know it's the Mistress's fault.

I know.

The war started when I turned seventeen. Master kept a close eye on us, making sure that we know the war means the same as we do, nothin'. I saw how hard he would work the field-folk. "They can't run if they don't got the energy to." That just made them more determined. One ran, then two, one made it-

"The other one almost made it through."

It was my birthday the day the war ended. 21 and free. Free. What does it mean to be free? I ain't never know because The War To Make Men Free ain't never free me.

"Lighter than a brown paper bag." That would control us. Our jobs, the hate, the segregation, *our lives*. That **test** can grant you access to live. A test you can't study for, you were either born to pass or fail. It isn't fair how I can walk into a church, but a woman the same age as me, with the same beliefs as me, and the thoughts as me can't. Just because I was *born* lighter than her. But, I know that. I know it's not fair, and I wish others did too.

"People like you never had it hard, you're light enough to fit in anyway." It was almost as if I could feel the words. No, I was never really free, bound in with the invisible strength of their pure hatred. Slavery ending didn't free us, we are still mentally shackled.

They are just jealous, my mother had said.

Just jealous.

"How could they be jealous?" I wanted to ask her, "by something I can't control, something they can't control. We were all slaves. How?" I begged her, I screamed for her.

But she was gone. I yearn to want better for myself, better for the world we all live in. Better for the world I want to raise my children in, at least. I've seen how ugly the world can become but maybe we can make it better.

In three months I'll be turning twenty-eight, and my daughter will be turning five. She will be going to school with all the other girls just like her, something I never got the chance to do.

But they aren't like her, not all of them. They are darker than her. They push her away as she isn't "one of

them."

"Why don't they like me? What is wrong with *me*?" What was I supposed to say that would make it better? Let her think it was *her* fault? No, I said the only excuse I could think of, I realized it then, I realized she would never be free.

"They are just jealous, sweetheart." A tear fell even though I didn't want it to.

"They are just jealous."

Akanksha Gomatam

Age: 14, Grade: 8

School Name: George H Moody Middle School, Henrico, VA

Educator: Patricia Walker

Category: Poetry

“it keeps me company (i think)”, Sunset Villas Retirement Home, Curse of Killing the Bambino

“it keeps me company (i think)”

i don't remember

the last time

i took a bath

1 week ago 2

keep me locked

in here. i think

they are scared

frightened of what

i might do

they gave me

it, black and white

Monster, with its

hollow eyes tracking

me around the room

never blinking

i don't remember

who they are but

it keeps me company

sometimes i imagine

he can talk during nights

when i cant sleep i stare

at his face and fall asleep.

other days i hate him

so much that i want

to rip his arms out

Sunset Villas Retirement Home

I am tired. My bones

are old and this is the

thanks I get for

taking care of others.

Now I have to spend

nights with the dreadful

old lady next door

beating me at bingo

which is the only

thing I look forward to
in this sad existence.

When *night* comes, after
they turn off the lights
the monsters come out
of hiding scratching scraping.
Noises come from inside
the wall. I see their claws
fangs reaching
stretching the wallpaper.
On those *nights*
I am always scared.
frightened they won't take
me and I will have to come back.
But everyday, I wake up
still in my small room.
Blue uniformed ladies
visit me. I wish they wouldn't
force me to swallow pills
a feat, considering
they make the monsters
go away.

Curse of Killing the Bambino

He always used to stick
to my side. it was adorable,
they thought, but I knew.
what he was really like.
Tossing the baseball *up*
and down without looking
those eyes now,
In my room I can see
him wandering around
aimlessly. My parents gave me
away but both of their sons
are here in this dark sterile
room but only I see
him still tossing the ball
higher and higher.

Everyday a reminder
of that small white
baseball with its red
threads and worn out
words but one day
I snapped from looking at
those soulless eyes as
they chased the ball *up*
and down until I
couldn't take it anymore
but they just sent me away
to this prison I hate it
here. I can hear him

and that stupid ball
next to me. I don't know
why they put me in here
there's nothing wrong with me.

Tess Holdaway

Age: 13, Grade: 8

School Name: St Catherine's School, Richmond, VA

Educator: Julie Elmore

Category: Short Story

Future an Affliction Away

The ref blows the whistle as a yellow flag is thrown on the ground. I look up at the blinding lights as sweat drips from my pounding head. *Another offsides I think, I can't believe we made it this far, we are complete nitwits!* I realize that is why they made me captain. I laugh to myself as I lower my eyes and take the line of scrimmage back five yards. I feel the adrenaline pulsing through my veins, pounding in my ear (I am already deafened by the crowd's silence as they hold their breath, not knowing the outcome of this game).

The quarterback, my best bud Ethan, calls, "Trips right, X curl, Z post!" I tense my muscles, waiting to launch myself ahead of the defense.

"Ready! Say, HIKE!"

A blur of bodies fly past me as I push for the end line, my legs moving so fast no one could hold me down. I see the ball fly over the field.

Panic.

Ethan overthrew the ball again with all of the pressure. *The poor guy.* I again pick up my pace, taking a bee-line to where I thought the ball would hit the ground.

It seems to happen in slow motion. I swing my arms back; just to pull them forward with such a force that sends me flying through the air. I stretch out my arms, feeling the pull of my muscles screaming in protest. I am completely parallel to the ground. The ball makes contact with my gloved fingers, barely holding on. *I need to hold on.* With my peripheral vision I see the crowd standing up, some posed to start screaming with any sudden movement. But, amongst them I see a certain face. An official looking one, with a UCLA shirt and blazer on top of it. My heart stops and my stomach drops. For that nanometer of a second, I realize what I have to do. *For Ethan.* With the ball in my outstretched hands, I arch my back, as if doing a mid-air cow pose and I kick my cleated feet upwards. I brace myself for the fall.

My ears are still ringing. It is our first ever state football championship title. I replayed the scene of that last touchdown in my mind. The man: I need to know. In all of the confusion (and tears in the case of our coach), I did not remember to seek him out. I pull Ethan aside.

"Dude, what's all the fuss?" hissed Ethan, "I want to get to the party."

"I know, but listen," I say, shushing his stubborn protests, "You know when I caught that last ball?"

"Yeah," said Ethan, scanning me, as if he thought I were crazy or something. "Why?"

"Well—" I hesitated.

"Spit it out! There will be girls at the party and I don't want to make a bad impression by being late!"

"You know what? It doesn't matter—"

"C'mon Chris, just—uh—tell me on the way. Okay?"

"Sure" I shrugged. *That was brief,* I thought, *but he might be at the party.* I shiver.

I got into my car and ushered Ethan into shotgun. As he slid into his seat, he started to pull up directions on his phone. "Don't forget to put your seatbelt on!" I bantered, "When used correctly, seat belts reduce the risk of fatal injury to front seat passengers by 45 percent and the risk of moderate to critical injury by 50 percent. Or something like that"

"Nerd," Ethan scoffed as he tugs at his seatbelt.

As we pull up to the place of the party, I see Ethan fidgeting with the buttons on his suit jacket. "Dude," I say to him, "You seem off. What could possibly be wrong? We won the championship!"

"Well," Ethan sighs in defeat, "My dad, you know how he is, always talking about my future and stuff. So, um, he

invited some college football coaches, and he wants to get me a football scholarship or whatever—”

“College already?” I interrupt, “but we have, like, a whole year to think about that!”

“That’s what I said! But of course he was like: ‘you have to think about it now or else all the spots will be taken up and you will be stuck working at McDonald’s your whole life’”

We laugh at his impression of his dad. I know Ethan never agrees with him, but they love each other anyway. It is always cool to see their relationship. Like a love-hate situation I guess.

“Well what are *you* ‘seeming off’ about?” Ethan eyed me, “Whats up?”

“Oh, right” I scrunch up my face, “I was thinking about, now don’t laugh, well I saw, someone, in the stands and—”

“A GIRL!” guessed Ethan. Well, I assume he was guessing even though he sounded so confident in himself. I really appreciate Ethan.

“Um, well—”

“I KNEW IT! NO DOUBT I TELL YOU, NO DOUBT! SON YOU BETTER GET GOING OR ELSE YOU ARE GOING TO MISS HER!”

“Gosh okay, you will scare them all away by the time we enter the building,” I half-heartedly reason. Ethan smirks at me, clasps me on the shoulder and gets out of the car.

He pokes his head into the car before shutting it and says, “Welp, best of luck to the both of us” And he skips off, probably rubbing in my eternal suffering. I shiver with doubt as I clamber out of the car.

Ethan and I sit on the Menchie’s high stools, me stirring my cake batter flavored frozen yogurt and him ferociously shoving his fruit flavored fro-yo into his mouth. *That is what he is*, I thought, *ferocious*. I smirk down into my bowl as Ethan finishes up. He looks down at his new UCLA shirt.

“You know,” sighs Ethan, “I knew I could do it. Never doubted myself once. Thankfully that scout was there to testify as a witness,” He chuckles to himself, “But what happened with you? How is *she*?”

“I’d rather not...”

“Oh c’mon” Ethan urged, “You haven’t spoken a word since getting, what was it, cake batter? For the record,” he clarified, “All fruit flavors are much better than any fake flavor like cake batter.” I now laughed to myself as I rested my eyes for a second, contemplating what to say to Ethan, my best friend.

Suddenly, jealousy sweeps over me. I don’t want to talk. *Your future, his future. What to say, what to say! Ethan is the most important.* The thought of existing any longer in a conscious state feels like torture. I rub my temples in slow desperate circles, trying to dispel this feeling as it takes over. *Ugh, I don’t want to feel this way, but talking just doesn’t seem like an option right now.*

“You know what? It has been a long day. All this talk ‘bout girls and college is making me tired”

“But—”

“See ya, Ethan,” I say as I dump my untouched frozen yogurt in the trash can. I walk out of the pink door, seeing Ethan’s face drop in disappointed confused-ness. I just want as much as anything to get out of my skin, into a better universe. The welcome world of sleep.

The sound of my dog’s yelps wake me up. I slap my hand to my forehead, trying to forget the tragedy of the night. Reality and unconsciousness both bring the steady stream of nerves and thoughts that result in a waterfall of emotions. I feel frustrated with myself. I don’t want to feel this way.

Why am I being such a coward?

It is like someone put me into another person’s body and mind. I throw my covers over my face and try to stifle the flow, and the cold, wet sun flowing into my room from my window. I’ve always been thankful for that window. It is a south facing window so it gets the most sun. It is the brightest in the house and my one true respite (besides football) from the outside world. A place where I connect to my spirit and my surroundings. Ethan always made fun of me for that. Which I thought, and still think sensible because it is not a very manly occurrence.

Ethan.

I jump out of bed and look at my messy room. I search and find a sweatshirt. I run around some more and find some pants. I brush my teeth with one hand and comb my hair with the other. I run out of my bedroom and slip down the hallway. I quickly unplug my charging phone as it rests on the granite countertop. Ethan texted me this early in the morning. The contents of which present three grimy words on the screen:

I hate you.

I pass my mom in the kitchen and kiss her on the cheek.

“What’s all this about?” She inquires.

“Oh nothing, I just forgot—something,” *or someone*.

“Be back by lunch!” She calls after me as I slip out the side door into our wet driveway.

Oh gosh, Ethan, I think as I pull out of the driveway. My stomach clenches with the thought of Ethan not wanting to be my friend any more. *It is scary*, I think, *that Ethan may never laugh at me again*.

I hopelessly turn on the windshield wipers. I feel like my sudden exit last night would hardly put a dent in our friendship. But with Ethan acting all weird, what am I supposed to expect? Many questions flow through my head, spinning in a whirlpool of doubts. No one wants to lose their best friend over a tiny fragment of stupidity in the many moments that make up our friendship. My hope is clouded with a thick fog. *What if?*

Ethan’s house is huge. Especially seeing as his family only has 4 members. We would always pass a football in his monstrous backyard. *Can’t get distracted*. I fling open the car door and arise from the carseat. I put on a jacket and a fake smile as I walk towards the grand oak doors. Three knocks. I hear Ethan’s little sister run into the entryway, clomping in her red cowgirl boots. She opens the door and peers up into my face, a good 3 or 4 feet above hers. I see a miniature bead of sweat form above her temple.

She takes an almost unnoticeable glance behind her as she says, “Ethan is sick today. He wanted me to tell you not to worry about h—”

“Can I come inside though?” I ask her, “My car is almost out of gas, does your dad still have an extra tank in the garage?” She looks nervous and unsure as she wordlessly widens the door. “Thanks stinker,” I give her a noogie as I walk by, trying to keep things casual. I feel genius as I sneak by Ethan’s 1st floor bedroom, on the way to the garage. Almost as if the gods provide, Kelsy’s mom calls her into the kitchen. She gives me the stink eye as she gallops off. I slip into Ethan’s room.

It is exactly as I remember it. The navy curtains cover the foggy windows, nicely complementing the orange-ish brown of the many footballs that litter his room. The comforter on his bed is just a plain white, but contrasted with a soft navy blanket. *Just a mess as always*.

And then there is Ethan. A mess is an understatement. His hair is in mats, and his UCLA shirt is torn apart on the floor. A few untouched meals lay spread out on the ground. I would not be surprised if they started to mold soon. Ethan’s face is red and blotchy. Like that one time we went to the park and figured out he was allergic to pollen. He kind of does look sick, but from his expression, I understand he is sick of me.

“You know,” says the raspy, horse voice of my best friend, “If I wanted *you* in here I would’ve called,”

I quickly glance at the window, seeing a glint of black metal poking out of the bush under the window, “That’s not very likely seeing as you threw your phone out the wind—”

“But I wouldn’t have done that if it weren’t for your pretty, little, *perfect*,” he spits the word at me, “face.”

“Wait, what does my face have to do with anything?” As an afterthought, I joke, “You think I’m pretty?”

He shoves my shoulder and stalks to the corner of his room, where his paper filled desk is. To my surprise, he flings all the paper to the ground, clearing his desk in what seems like months. He sits down in his rolley chair and starts rubbing his temples, his back turned to me.

“I’ve worked my butt off,” Ethan scowles, “to get accepted into UCLA. To make a place for myself in this mean, cruel universe”

I keep quiet, knowing whatever I say will provoke him further.

“Getting into varsity football is not an easy task mind you. You didn’t even have to try to be accepted. Being the perfect being that you are. With a perfect life and a perfect future”

“What do you mean? I haven’t even applied to college yet, let alone being accepte—”

“Have you checked your mail yet?” he asks, “They got us mixed up.”

I am overcome with a tidal wave of shock, and especially sadness and pity for Ethan. (And an anger I can’t describe for me even thinking of the word jealousy last night.) “How?” I manage to gasp, “How? But Ethan, you were perfect for it. I don’t understand, Ethan, why didn’t you tell me sooner!”

He jumps up and points at me as if he were accusing me of a crime, “I was ashamed okay?! No need to get on my back like that! No need to rub it in! Gosh, Christian I thought we were friends!” Ethan bursts out screaming, yelling as if it would blow me away. He takes a huge, shaking breath; then stalks up to me, I don’t understand what is happening. *Why the sudden change in mood?*

He again points at me, now much closer. I bet if I leaned forward, we would bump noses. He whispers a cold, harsh whisper, "My dad, my dad lost his job. We can't pay for college anymore. My future is ruined because of the great shadow of Christian Webster."

He runs past me, bumping into me with such force that I fall back onto his bed. I quickly recover and run after him. Mr. and Mrs. Mufflin's car was gone from the driveway. Ethan full out sprints towards the kitchen and opens the drawer I knew held the kitchen knives.

I panic. The most panic and sadness and adrenaline I have ever felt in my whole life.

Ethan is in danger.

Ethan *is* a danger.

I put my hands out. Sort of like what Owen does in Jurassic World to the raptors. I better act cautious because one wrong move can be the end of my best friend. "Dude, put the knife down," I enunciate every word. "You have no idea what you are doing"

"Oh, I don't know," Ethan cackles, "but what I do know is I won't have to live in your shadow any more." He raises the knife to his radial artery. I dive for his torso.

We lay on the ground, Ethan in my arms. He sobs into my shoulder. I have not yet recovered. I knocked the knife from his hand when I did a football dive. It now is under the island counter. No need to remind him of his suffering. We sit there past lunch time. *Sorry mom*. There is no need to say words. No need to move. I whisper, "It's over, Ethan."

"I'm so sorry."

Epilogue

I play with dad's fingers, waiting impatiently for Uncle Chris to come out of the airplane. I look up at daddy's bespeckled face. He has laugh lines at the corners of his eyes. I haven't heard many stories from his childhood, but he is always so happy. I finally see Chris emerge with my BFF, Emerson. They both look travel worn but happy to see us. My dad embraces Chris and they do the weird communicating thing where you know they are speaking to each other but they don't say anything.

"Long time no see Ethan," Chris says to dad as I run past them and embrace Emerson.

"Hi Krissy!" Emerson says to me. We both giggle in unison but I still hear dad whisper to Uncle Chris, "I'm the happiest man alive."

Anne Hubbard

Age: 14, Grade: 8

School Name: St Catherine's School, Richmond, VA

Educator: Julie Elmore

Category: Short Story

You're Next

You're Next

The rain pounded the streets as Jenna Taylor anxiously awaited the arrival of her new nanny. The pitter-patter of the rain against the glass had a distinct rhythm that Jenna had almost memorized. The grey sky and dark, dreary weather left her with nothing better to do than sit and wait. She sat at the window all afternoon watching the road flood with water.

After hours of waiting, she finally saw headlights from the distance. She grabbed her umbrella and hurried outside. Out of the car stepped a nice girl, named Emily. She was young, only twenty-three, and pretty. She had dazzling hazel eyes with long, brown, shiny hair.

After days of getting to know Jenna, Emily noticed a change in Jenna's mood. She appeared restless, more so uneasy. She could tell something was wrong just from looking in her eyes. Emily asked Jenna if she was okay, and Jenna claimed to be fine. Days passed and Jenna never had much to say.

One night as Emily was putting Jenna to bed, they could hear the blaring sounds of Mr. and Mrs. Taylor fighting. Mr. Taylor accused Mrs. Taylor of having an affair, however she neither confirmed nor denied. Jenna claimed that this went on almost every night, so she was used to it.

Days passed which lead to weeks which lead to months. After three months passed Emily noticed that Mrs. Taylor was gone. She thought she was just on a business trip, or vacation, and she thought nothing of it. Mr. Taylor quickly told everyone that Mrs. Taylor was fine, she was just taking some time away from everything. Emily started to feel very suspicious of him because Mrs. Taylor was not the type of person to just leave. Meanwhile, Jenna was starting to get worried about her mom because she knew something was very wrong, but she figured whatever it was, her dad would take care of it.

The next morning, after breakfast, Jenna wanted to play hide and seek. Emily would count and Jenna would hide. After one minute of extensive counting, Emily set out to find Jenna. She searched far and wide for what felt like hours and found no sign of her. About to give up, she thought of one more place to look in the house. The study.

The study was a forbidden room that only Jenna's father was allowed in. Every member of the family had been told at least a million times never to enter. Emily remembered back to her first day on the job when Mr. Taylor told her to "never under any circumstances enter the study." Emily thought there was no other place to look in the house. She had exhausted every room in the house except this one.

As she made her way up the stairs to the study, she thought about all the trouble she would be in if she were to get caught. Thankfully, Mr. Taylor was working outside and Mrs. Taylor was away, so she had the house to herself. She searched around the study, being extra careful. There was no sign of Jenna, so she started to leave. As she approached the door, something caught her eye. A small silver object was sticking out of the shelf. Emily went to investigate it and seemed to have been stuck behind something. She gingerly pulled out a knife drenched in blood. Emily screamed louder than she ever had. She quickly caught herself, and ran went downstairs to continue looking for Jenna. There was no other place for her to look except for outside in the shed.

As Emily approached the shed, a feeling of terror filled her. The shed was pitch black and far enough from the house that no one could hear a sound coming from it, including a scream. She took out her phone to use as a flashlight and slowly proceeded ahead. She cautiously stepped into the shed as if she were a lamb about to be slaughtered. As she stepped in, her feet abruptly slid out from under her and she fell to the ground. She looked up to find a wet red streak smeared across the floor. Next to it, was Mrs. Taylor, gasping for air. The sound Mrs. Taylor reminded Emily of the sounds coming from her own mother just a few months earlier. Next to her was Jenna, crying hysterically, not knowing what to do. Mrs. Taylor had a large cut in her throat and although Emily searched frantically she found nothing more than a weak pulse coming from Mrs. Taylor's wrist. Emily could see the panic in Mrs. Taylor's eyes as she begged for her life. Emily quickly found a rag laying on a bench and applied pressure to

the wound, desperately trying to stop the blood flow. She then called an ambulance to get Mrs. Taylor to the hospital. Although it felt like hours, The EMTs arrived minutes later ready to help Mrs. Taylor. Jenna raced inside, traumatized, too scared to speak.

As the ambulance pulled away the police officers arrived ready to assist. While talking to the police, Emily picked up her phone, and relayed a message from the hospital, that Mrs. Taylor had died due to extensive injuries. In an effort to keep young Jenna calm, Emily told Jenna her mom would be just fine.

In that moment, Mr. Taylor ran into the room and asked, "How is that possible?"

No one knew what he meant given the fact that he should have been ecstatic that his wife was ok. He drove directly to the hospital. The police and Emily followed him as he entered the room in which his wife lay dead. He had a look of relief as he saw his wife's corpse covered with a white sheet.

Forgetting that the police were in the room he said, "Thank God, honey, I didn't want to have to do all of that again. Killing you was hard enough the first time". The police were recording as Mr. Taylor admitted to the willful murder. He was immediately taken to jail and Jenna was taken to live with Emily.

A week after the murder, Emily received a mysterious envelope with no return address. She opened it and inside was a small sheet of paper with a note written in thick, red ink, stating, "You're Next."

Jayden Huynh-Vuong

Age: 17, Grade: 12

School Name: Glen Allen High School, Glen Allen, VA

Educator: Robert Meister

Category: Personal Essay & Memoir

Picking Back Up the Crown

Standing proudly in front of my first grade class, I sported a homemade creation, representing one of my proudest achievements: a crown, cut roughly using safety scissors, out of lapis lazuli-colored cardboard with dollar store jewels, hot glue-gunned to the front. I'd toiled over the mock-regalia for a few days prior to my class's weekly show-and-tell, instructing my mother exactly how I wanted this masterpiece to be. It was a prime reflection of my youthful spirit and untainted innocence; however, I would learn that my expression of masculinity and gender identity would be teared down by a society who clung helplessly to conventional norms.

Recently, I've heard comments from relatives, inquiring, "Where did that smiling little boy go?". While I still consider myself flamboyant, I saw myself limiting it as much as I could, starting elementary school. I received remarks from others, both directly and behind my back: "You act weird", or "You're like a girl". Although it was off-putting, I kept doing what I thought was natural. But comments swarmed in from uncles, cousins, and even close friends, who all relayed the same observation, some disapprovingly. At that point, I knew something wasn't clicking. But it wasn't until I joined club volleyball in middle school, interacting with mostly white, cisgender males that I became aware: there was only "one version" of masculinity. This idea, "toxic masculinity", was reinforced by a culture of degradation and a need to be superior. It was suffocating.

I saw myself changing to meet the typical expectations of what a teenage American male was supposed to be. That included deepening vocal tone, avoiding anything associated with femininity, and most importantly, replicating appearance. Khaki shorts were glued to my body. Yikes, I still cringe. Reflecting, I've realized that my sacrifice of individuality to feel accepted by others never returned any closure in those six years. It wasn't until I came home one day from school in tenth grade when I saw my mother singing aloud on our living room couch. I peered over her shoulders to hear the bubblegum beats of South Korean boyband BTS's new single, "Boy with Luv". Dancing with perfect synchronization, their harmonious vocals were not the stars of the show. No, I was enamored by their pastel-colored hair, soft but defined facial features, and prominently, their vibrant sense of fashion.

Oh my god. To see a group of talented, young Asian men be successful and celebrated, while displaying this unconventional form of masculinity, was transformative. This balancing of femininity with masculinity -- executed through clothing and make-up -- felt like a divine calling. I was experiencing waves of self-renewal from these superstars and wondered if others like me shared the same sentiment. So, when eleventh grade came around, I dedicated my year-long study in AP Research to exploring how the androgyny of male K-pop idols influenced young Asian-American masculinity. Participants from across the U.S. and professors from around the world confirmed my assumptions: male K-pop idols' perceived gender fluidity is challenging heteronormativity, giving young Asian-American males a sense of freedom to experiment with masculinity. I scored a five.

In my attempt to understand the implications of K-pop boy bands, I was able to bring a sense of validation and closure to my participants but also to myself after years of insecurity. Thank you mom for watching that music video, and cheers to K-pop for allowing me to use your exuberance to begin the healing of Asian-American youth, following a history of racial stereotypes and inferiority complexes. With a more profound understanding of myself and others, I recognize my superpowers: whether it's leading my members in assisting students as president of Mu Alpha Theta or having my play about the Cambodian genocide professionally produced, I strive to always uplift marginalized communities in my endeavors and will continue to bring forth silenced issues to the limelight wherever I go.

Jayden Huynh-Vuong

Age: 17, Grade: 12

School Name: Glen Allen High School, Glen Allen, VA

Educator: Robert Meister

Category: Personal Essay & Memoir

A Self-Actualizing Awakening

Sifting through my elementary school's dusty shelves of books, I glanced at my classmate who had picked up one of Erin Hunter's *Warriors* novels. The vivid imagery of the pumpkin-colored cat, paired with pale gray stripes and emerald eyes, stood out to me. Since I had two cats at home, I was intrigued. "This could be the next one for me to read", I thought, excitedly, as a fourth grader. I had trouble connecting with texts if they didn't pique my interest; so, quite frequently, I would reject the mundane books my teachers offered and looked for something else. But, this one was extraordinary.

When she had returned the book to the shelf after reading the synopsis or whatever, I walked over and picked it up. Suddenly, I was met with a cold remark from my librarian as she peered over my shoulders: "Oh! You can't read that! That's not for you."

What? Why couldn't I read it? My classmate was having a grand ol' time enjoying the contents of the book. Why couldn't I? As I reflect on this experience from time to time, I ponder her justification. What was a valid reason to restrict an educational source from a fourth grader, especially if it furthers intellectual development? Isn't that the point of school? Oh, I know. There wasn't one. My classmate was white, and I was a person of color. The librarian was also white and well into her age, but chose to stop me from reading the book and not her. It just didn't add up.

Elementary school had the privilege of being first to break my perception of the world, and more importantly, the pride for my racial identity. I felt like I lost an aspect of my innocence. Jean Piaget's "Egocentric Theory" was completely thrown out the window. But, as a child, I grew up in the United States feeling indifferent as a minority -- that was until I surrounded myself with people who looked different. At home, my parents and sister supported and loved me unconditionally, although, we would have fights from time to time as typical of a normal family. Our arguments, however, did not reflect our divine appreciation for our Cambodian, Vietnamese, and Chinese heritage. We celebrated cultural traditions and feasted on the treasures of our cuisines. And, for a long time, this was all I've ever known. I was proud of who I was.

Why couldn't my classmates and teachers see the same beauty that I did? The beauty that I hold. Although most of my formative years of education were an average experience, I couldn't help contemplate the insults my classmates made about my facial features or their racial stereotypes. This resulted in a loss of confidence and fondness for my identity. At times, I would be reclusive of telling others what my ethnicity was, the languages I knew, or the foods that I ate. Although I'm aware that their questions were truly genuine, I perceived it as an attack to my already-crippling composition. I'm just as American as you, and that's all that matters.

I entered into a phase of trying to "Americanize" or "White-ify" myself in attempts to fit in with the other kids. I wouldn't dare to bring up my culture and tried to talk about topics majority-white, suburban children would be interested in: the new episode of *iCarly* or the multicolored trolls that sat on your shoulder, *Shoulder Buddies*. Little did I know would I neglect my ethnicity up to seventh grade.

Academically, the interaction with the librarian made me self-conscious of my abilities. It insinuated that I was intellectually inferior than my peers, and at that time, my grades were decent, but I figured decent wasn't enough. From elementary, I strived to earn the highest grades and accomplishments. I devoted extra time to studying, understanding the content, and going to teachers for help. Throughout middle school, it paid off, and I was making straight A's, a 4.0 GPA, while balancing year-round volleyball and extracurriculars. Reflecting, my ambition to excel in academics was rooted in an attempt to bring validation to my past scars. But, as I entered high school, I knew that academic achievements fueled by trauma and resentment would never bring me closure.

My parents are adamant about being the highest version of yourself and uplifting those around you. Being reminded of their words, I came to disdain how my personal drive centered around receiving solace for my belittlement in elementary school. I wanted my involvement in high school and future projects to mean something.

Something that, instead, brought awareness and empathy to marginalized communities. Still unclear about my moral compass, a playwriting opportunity presented itself during my sophomore theatre arts class. My grandfather had just passed away before the start of 2019, so I decided to dedicate my play to him and my mother.

While my classmates wrote about archetypal stories, depicting romance or heroic adventures, I based mine off of my mother's escape from the Cambodian genocide. It was a traumatic experience so harrowing and painful, I could see it in my mother's eyes as she recounted her memories, while I took notes. Most of my cousins around my age weren't aware of how frightening leaving one's country was in order to emigrate to the U.S. and much of the events have been unspeakable in the American media. I had an epiphany one night as I was piecing together the story: if I can use this opportunity to educate and bring awareness to the horrors Cambodian immigrants had to face this will, not only contribute to the literature, but promote understanding for Asian-American immigrants.

I finished writing my play, and it flowered into a forty-minute emotional roller coaster, filled with magical realism and trauma-manifesting characters. I submitted *Red Butterfly* to SPARC's New Voices for the Theater, a Richmond theater company's playwriting and production program in January 2020 for the heck of it. Miraculously, a representative emailed me in May that I was selected as a winner out of 175 submissions to have their play produced, virtually. I told my family, and we jumped up and down, ecstatically. I looked into my mom's eyes, communicating without words, "This is it. I'm gonna tell your story to the world."

For two weeks during the summer, I worked with theater professionals and the other playwrights to revise my play and was assigned my own entourage of directors and actors to produce *Red Butterfly*. Seeing the widening eyes of my peers, actors, and teachers as they consumed the content was revelatory. Although we'll never be able to fathom what my parents endured, I was able to connect this story with people throughout the east coast. The night of the performance was life-changing. I sat in front of my computer, frozen and speechless, as I watched the audience turn their cameras back on, applauding the actors who finished the virtual production. In my head, the memories of bullying and racism juxtaposed the viewers' celebration of my mother's story. I felt a wave of closure engulf my entire body.

Through this experience, I became aware of my soul purpose on this planet: utilizing my academic strengths and advocacy to bring justice to oppressed groups. I can connect people through my projects to raise awareness and promote empathy for others who look different than us. And for the individuals who made me feel small and weak, thank you for teaching me that I do indeed matter. My identity and interests have always been justified. As I walk through this nuanced world as a proud person of color, I see clearly that the belittled and bullied matter the most, for it is our mission to uplift those around us to build a more inclusive and unconditionally loving community. That is our mission as the guardians of this planet and bearers of unity and peace.

Jayden Huynh-Vuong

Age: 17, Grade: 12

School Name: Glen Allen High School, Glen Allen, VA

Educator: Shelby Mugford

Category: Dramatic Script

Red Butterfly

SCENE 1

(Curtains open. The following text is projected on a backdrop screen: The Communist Party of Kampuchea, led by Pol Pot, arose in 1960 and challenged the pro-United States Khmer Republic, sparking a civil war from 1970 to 1975. After five years of fighting, the communist party was victorious and took control of Cambodia under their regime: Khmer Rouge. The projection transitions to a picture of a rice paddy field, titled "Snoung, Cambodia. 1977.")

Lights up. The sounds of crickets chirping, birds tweeting, and a faint, calming melody are played. The scene begins in CHANNARY's dream in the rice paddy field. There are props of trees, grass, and shrubs arranged upstage. The RICE STEMS are standing, side by side, motionless, in a straight line. CHANNARY is center stage, looking out to the audience, in a dazed, dream-like trance.

A few moments later, MOM enters from center stage right and moves across the stage. CHANNARY sees MOM and "awakens". The lights turn a pastel lavender color.)

CHANNARY

Mom? *(looks closer)* Oh, it's Ma!

(MOM heads toward center stage left.)

Ma! Wait! Where are you goin'?

MOM

I have to finish cutting the rice stems.

CHANNARY

But, why?

MOM

We need food to eat, don't we?

(She continues moving.)

CHANNARY

Yeah, but ... wai-wait! Don't leave me here! I wanna go back home!

MOM

'Nary, this is your home.

CHANNARY

No, I-I mean the village!--

MOM

It's safer here. The rice paddy fields will protect you, nourish you, love you. They gave life to me, my mom, her mom, and so on. Take care of them, and they'll take care of you.

(She exits CSL.)

CHANNARY

Huh? Wait! Bu-but! *(Sighs)*

(BUTTERFLY enters from CSR; She does graceful and ballerina-like movements as she moves across the stage. The lights turn a warm yellow hue.)

(eyes light up) Woahhhhhh!! Cool!!!

(She excitedly goes up to BUTTERFLY and points up and down.)

(In awe) Wow! I love your blue's and yellow's!

(BUTTERFLY smiles and offers her hand to CHANNARY. She grabs it, and they start dancing together in an upbeat version of ballroom dancing. CHANNARY giggles and laughs in delight.)

Hahaha! This is so much fun!

(CHANNARY continues to giggle and laugh as they dance. BUTTERFLY twirls her, and CHANNARY spins with euphoria. At the end, BUTTERFLY lets go and moves toward CSL.)

(Confused) Wait, what? You're leaving too?

(BUTTERFLY exits CSL.)

(Sad) Why is everyone leaving? No one wants to stay.

(NARITH enters from CSR, running with a stick in excitement and out of breath. The lights turn a pastel, light blue.)

NARITH

AHHH!! I gotcha now!!! HIYAH!!

(He throws it sloppily into a patch of rice stems downstage center.)

CHANNARY

Narith?? Big bro? *(disbelief)* What are you doin--

NARITH

(enthusiastically) Trying to catch a fish, 'Nary! C'mon, let's see If I got it!

(They go to see.)

CHANNARY

Hmmmm ... I don't see anything. Unless you count this snail.

(She picks up a snail.)

NARITH

Dang it! They're always so hard to get! I can never remember the trick that Dad taught me. Hmm, now help me look for mor-- Woah!! There's a leech on you!

(He points to CHANNARY's right thigh.)

CHANNARY

What? A LEECH? *(panics)* WHERE IS IT? HELP ME GET IT OFF!

(She turns frantically.)

NARITH

Stay still, you big baby! You're gonna bleed even more!

(The RICE STEMS begin to move in unison toward CHANNARY on "bleed". They don't notice.)

CHANNARY

JUST GET THE LEECH OFF YOU DING-DONG!

(She finally spots it. NARITH quickly exits.)

Ah! I found it! *(beat)* Ugh, yuck! It's so gross, and it hurts like--

(She turns to see that NARITH has disappeared.)

Narith? Where did you go?

(The lights turn dark red. Thunder rumbles. The RICE STEMS approach CHANNARY.)

Narith?! *(Startled, gasps)* Oh, no! Not you guys again!

(She starts to back up.)

Get away from me! Don't touch me!

(The RICE STEMS encircle CHANNARY, chanting:)

RICE STEMS

Rouge. Rouge! ROUGE!!

CHANNARY

(Shakily) I-I remember the day you guys came into our village. You made us leave! You hurt my friends!

(She wipes tears out of her eyes.)

You took my family away!

(The RICE STEMS lunge at CHANNARY and grab her.)

AHHH! NO! *(Screams)* You can't take us again! I wanna go home! I JUST WANNA GO HOME!

RICE STEMS

WE ARE EVERYWHERE! WE ARE FOREVER! WE ARE THE KHMER ROUGE!

(They violently tug at CHANNARY.)

CHANNARY

GET AWAY! MA! NARITH! DAD!

CONNIE

(She yells from backstage.)

WAKE UP!

(CONNIE's sonic-boom like sound strikes the RICE STEMS, and they collapse. Lightning strikes and violent thunder rumbles. The lights black out. Heavy rain proceeds. The RICE STEMS exit. The stage crew places a

thatched hut with a few pots and pans inside on CS. CHANNARY lies in the hut, her head away and body perpendicular to the audience. A clothesline is next to the hut.)

SCENE 2

(A picture of a Cambodian labor camp, titled "Labor Camp. 1979." is projected. Lights come back on. CHANNARY is tossing and turning in her sleep.)

CHANNARY

No! No! Leave me ALONE!

(She wakes up.)

(gasps) Where am I?!

(She slowly sits up.)

(Sigh of relief) Oh ... that stupid nightmare again. Ugh, every single time I dream about home ...*(Sighs)*
(She stands up and looks around.)

Ma? Dad? Are you here? Narith? I guess they're still out working.

(She walks over to the entrance of the hut, opens the door slightly, and peaks out.)

Huh ... no one's outside, either. That's rare. I wonder what's going on?

(She begins to step outside.)

No! What are you thinking? You can't go outside! Remember what Ma and Dad have been saying for the last year we've been in this labor camp? *(Serious)* Don't ever leave the hut when they're out working! They could hurt you!
(PALM TREE #1 enters from CSR, going toward the hut, sassily.)

PALM TREE #1

(Snobby) "Don't ever leave the hut when they're out working! They could hurt you!"

CHANNARY

Don't trust anyone in the camp, even if you know them. Someone could kidnap you!

(PALM TREE #2 enters from CSL, going toward the hut.)

PALM TREE #2

(Wickedly) "Don't trust anyone in the camp, even if you know them! Someone could kidnap you!"

PALM TREE #1 and #2

(cynically) Hahaha!

CHANNARY

If anyone knocks on the door, keep your mouth shut! It could be one of them.

(PALM TREE #3 enters CSR, going toward the hut.)

PALM TREE #3

(sarcastically) You hear that, y'all? "Keep your mouth shut!", she says. Aren't you the one to talk?

CHANNARY

And do this every single day for hours and hours. *(sad, frustrated)* But, for how much longer? How much longer am

I supposed to hide in here? I don't want to live like this for the rest of my life!

(PALM TREE #4 enters CSL, going toward the hut.)

PALM TREE #4

(dramatic) Oh, our dearest, Channary! You and your family were forced by the Khmer Rouge to abandon your home to work to death in this cramped and disgusting labor camp. You must be exhausted. But are you really? Ma and Dad told you to stay in here for "protection" while they work as slaves.

PALM TREE #1

Aren't you bored of doing nothing all day? You're like, what? Fifteen?

CHANNARY

I-I'm eight years ol--

PALM TREE #2

That's grown up enough! Isn't it time that you do what you want, Channary? Everyone else gets to go toil! Why can't you?

CHANNARY

Well, I-I can't work because they said I'm too young. But, yeah, you're right. I'm practically a grown up, and I know what I want. *(bitter)* I want to leave this horrible place and go back home where we can be together again. I want to do what I want and not have to listen to--

PALM TREE #3

The Khmer Rouge?

CHANNARY

Well ... kinda.

PALM TREE #3

Or is it Ma and Dad?

CHANNARY

(hesitates) They're only keeping me in here to keep me safe.

PALM TREE #4

No, they're restricting you from doing what you want. *(beat)* I have an idea! Why don't you just leave!

CHANNARY

But, Ma and Dad told me not to go outside, under no circumstances. What if I get caught? What if I get punished?

PALM TREE #1

Not as much as how the Khmer Rouge is punishing YOUR people! They're the reason you and your family are here in the first place!

PALM TREE #2

And who cares what they think! Why don't you just have some fun? Come outside, and we can leave the labor camp happily ever after!

CHANNARY

Oh, okay ... I would like that. *(beat)* But, what if we run into one of those Khmer Rouge guards?--

PALM TREE #3

Stop with the what if's and but's! You're not going to run into them. And, if you do, it's not like they're going to kill you ... or maybe they will?

ALL PALM TREES

HAHAHAHA! Hilarious! Ahh.

(The PALM TREES surround the hut.)

PALM TREE #4

Come outside. Come be with us!

PALM TREE #1

Enjoy yourself for once. Free at last!

CHANNARY

(To herself) I can be free again, and do what I want to do. But, what about Ma, Dad, and Narith?

PALM TREE #2

Leave them!

PALM TREE #3

Open the doors!

ALL PALM TREES

Come! Come! COME BE WITH US! LET US IN!

(CHANNARY waits a moment, conflicted, then nods. As she opens the door, CONNIE runs to CHANNARY. The lights become a warm, yellow hue.)

CONNIE

STOP!!!

(The PALM TREES weaken and groan; they slacken and become lifeless in response to CONNIE's entry.

CONNIE grabs CHANNARY's hand, preventing her from opening the door.)

CONNIE

'Nary! Everything's okay. Just breathe. *(inhales and exhales deeply)* That's right, take deep breaths in and let it out. 'Nary, don't listen to a word they say. They're trying to get you to go outside. And trust me, it's the opposite of fun out there.

CHANNARY

(confused) Wh- what? Why can't I go outside? Who are you?

CONNIE

Oh, right, I forgot to introduce myself. *(giggles)* Well, Channary, my name's Connie, and I'm kinda like your "guardian angel", I suppose. I'm here to guide you through some tough times.

CHANNARY

Really? A guardian angel? I thought they were just make-believe, and I didn't think they'd look like ... like you! *(She gestures up and down her body.)*

CONNIE

Like a little girl? I know. Everyone has a guardian angel that helps them, depending on what the person is going through. They may appear in dreams, visions, or through another form. I changed how I look to match someone around your age, so you wouldn't freak out. It'd be frightening if I were 18 feet tall, blindly bright, and had gigantic wings!

CHANNARY

Oh ... okay. So, can you look like regular everyday people? Can you look like my Mom? My Dad? Also, you appear in what now?

CONNIE

Yes and dreams! I was in one of yours, recently; well, it was more a nightmare. You were having a pretty tough time, so I thought I would--

CHANNARY

(Eyes light up) Ohhhh! I heard someone telling me to “wake up” last night. Was that you? Thank god! Or I guess, thank Connie! *(beat)* I’ve been having those nightmares ever since the Khmer Rouge soldiers came into our village and forced us to this camp. I was so scared.

(The PALM TREES twitch.)

CONNIE

I fixed that, don’t worry. The soldiers *(to herself)* - or I guess they manifested into rice stems - won’t be bothering you anymore. *(cautiously)* Actually, that’s a half-lie ... I wanted to talk to you about the Khmer Rouge. See, they’re on the rise again, and they’re--

CHANNARY

(panics) Oh no! Are they gonna take us somewhere again? Are they gonna hurt us?

(The PALM TREES straighten their posture.)

CONNIE

That’s why I’m here right now ... to give you and your family a little guidance. I need you to listen very carefully to this: the Khmer Rouge are planning a mass genocide. Do you know what genocide means, Channary?

CHANNARY

N-No ... is it good for us?--

CONNIE

Nope. It’s far from good. They want to expedite everyone’s departure date from this planet.

CHANNARY

Huh? Expe-what?

CONNIE

Oh, sorry, I’m used to saying all this spiritual talk with the angels. *(Sighs)* They want to get rid of everyone. They want to kill all life here.

CHANNARY

(Panics) Wha-what? They can’t do that!

(Her anxiety starts to rush back in.)

Why? Why would they want to do that???

(The PALM TREES lift their heads and “reanimate”.)

CONNIE

Some people ... just have ... different ideas for the way things should be, and those ideas may not be for the highest good of all. But, Channary, I foresee ... *(concentrates)* hmmm yes! Your family will be given an opportunity to escape! When it comes, leave immediately! But, you’re going to see a lot of scary things. I want you to be prepared and try to clear your mind every time it happens--

(The PALM TREES smile cynically and turn to the hut.)

PALM TREE #1

Hey! Can you quit talking for once and shut your pie-hole?

PALM TREE #2

Who do you think you are, barging in like that? We were having a fine conversation with Channary!

CHANNARY

Oh, it’s just them, again. They were trying to make me go outside earlier.

PALM TREE #3

Yes, Channary! And we still can! C’mon, let’s go!

CHANNARY

Ugh, they’re so annoying.

CONNIE

Let’s make them leave then.

CHANNARY

How are we gonna do that?

CONNIE

The mind is the most powerful tool you have. If you truly know what you want, and you tell them clearly, they’ll leave.

PALM TREES
OH MY GOD, HURRY UP!!!
CHANNARY

Will that really work? It seems like they'll never stop!
CONNIE

Yes, it will. The battle is in the mind. Trust me.

(She extends her hand.)

Here, take my hand. Let's go.

(CONNIE and CHANNARY stand in the doorway.)

PALM TREE #2
Oh, there you are, Channary! *(Frowns)* ... Oh, she came too.
CONNIE

Okay, now tell them what you want.

CHANNARY

I-I ...

PALM TREE #3
What is it? Spit it out?

CHANNARY

I don't want to go outside. I want you to leave.

PALM TREE #4

But, this is what you wanted!

CHANNARY

No, I changed my mind. This isn't. Leave me alone!

ALL PALM TREES

Ughhh, fine. You're a party-pooper.

(ALL PALM TREES exit.)

CONNIE

Yup, we don't care. Go. Bye.

(She turns to CHANNARY.)

See? That wasn't so bad, was it?

CHANNARY

Yeah ... it actually worked. They left.

CONNIE

If something is bothering you, you need to take action and confront it. Alright?

(CHANNARY nods.)

Now, where did I leave off? Ah, yes! There will be a time where you and your family can escape!

CHANNARY

How will I know?

CONNIE

You will know when it happens.

CHANNARY

(Anxious) Ugh, I don't know if I can do this. I-I'm scared! I don't want to!--

CONNIE

You're a smart girl, Channary, and super brave too! You're a lot stronger than you think you are, and your bright mind will lead the way to the light. Just make sure to think of things that bring you happiness and joy - fill your mind with positivity no matter how you feel or what you see.

CHANNARY

I don't know ...

CONNIE

(A breath) When you were born, I foresaw all the possibilities around this time. So many of them are guaranteeing wonderful outcomes because of the person you've become today. This is your destiny. You're more than ready! I have no doubt you'll be "A-okay" *(winks)*.

CHANNARY

Hey, that's what Dad says!

CONNIE

Okay, Channary, I'm going to leave now.

CHANNARY

(Begs) No, wait! Not yet. When will you be back?

CONNIE

(Smiles) I'll always be watching over you. Remember to think positively, and you'll be fine. I've told you what you need to know.

(CONNIE exits. CHANNARY breaths in and out slowly, processing the events.)

SCENE 3

(NARITH, MOM, and DAD enter from CSL. They walk inside the hut; exhausted, dirty, and insanely tired.)

NARITH

I never want to see a log of wood again!

(He lies down on the floor.)

MOM

Narith, be quiet! You don't want them to hear you.

NARITH

But, I'm sick of chopping them up! My right arm is turning blue from holding the axe all day, and I'm tired of them bossing me around! (mockingly) "You! Go and chop the next 5 piles of wood after you're done with this 5!" Ugh, how much longer do we have to do this for?

MOM

I know you're tired, honey. I'm sorry, but we don't have a choice. We do this as long as we have to, and maybe, they'll spare us ...

NARITH

Ughhhh, but I want to go back home! I want things to go back to normal! I'M BEING OVERWORKED!--

DAD

Son, we all are. Our lives are on the line here. While we don't know what's going to happen to us, we have to stick together, no matter what. Family's always first.

NARITH

(grumpily) Whatever. I'm gonna take a nap.

DAD

Hey, look at the bright side! At least, you didn't have to pick up the animals' poop today!

MOM

(laughs) That's true!

(NARITH doesn't respond. A few seconds later, he's snoring.)

Wow, that's a record!

Jayden Huynh-Vuong

Age: 17, Grade: 12

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Picking Back Up the Crown

Standing proudly in front of my first grade class, I sported a homemade creation, representing one of my proudest achievements: a crown, cut roughly using safety scissors, out of lapis lazuli-colored cardboard with dollar store jewels, hot glue-gunned to the front. I'd toiled over the mock-regalia for a few days prior to my class's weekly show-and-tell, instructing my mother exactly how I wanted this masterpiece to be. It was a prime reflection of my youthful spirit and untainted innocence; however, I would learn that my expression of masculinity and gender identity would be teared down by a society who clung helplessly to conventional norms.

Recently, I've heard comments from relatives, inquiring, "Where did that smiling little boy go?". While I still consider myself flamboyant, I saw myself limiting it as much as I could, starting elementary school. I received remarks from others, both directly and behind my back: "You act weird", or "You're like a girl". Although it was off-putting, I kept doing what I thought was natural. But comments swarmed in from uncles, cousins, and even close friends, who all relayed the same observation, some disapprovingly. At that point, I knew something wasn't clicking. But it wasn't until I joined club volleyball in middle school, interacting with mostly white, cisgender males that I became aware: there was only "one version" of masculinity. This idea, "toxic masculinity", was reinforced by a culture of degradation and a need to be superior. It was suffocating.

I saw myself changing to meet the typical expectations of what a teenage American male was supposed to be. That included deepening vocal tone, avoiding anything associated with femininity, and most importantly, replicating appearance. Khaki shorts were glued to my body. Yikes, I still cringe. Reflecting, I've realized that my sacrifice of individuality to feel accepted by others never returned any closure in those six years. It wasn't until I came home one day from school in tenth grade when I saw my mother singing aloud on our living room couch. I peered over her shoulders to hear the bubblegum beats of South Korean boyband BTS's new single, "Boy with Luv". Dancing with perfect synchronization, their harmonious vocals were not the stars of the show. No, I was enamored by their pastel-colored hair, soft but defined facial features, and prominently, their vibrant sense of fashion.

Oh my god. To see a group of talented, young Asian men be successful and celebrated, while displaying this unconventional form of masculinity, was transformative. This balancing of femininity with masculinity -- executed through clothing and make-up -- felt like a divine calling. I was experiencing waves of self-renewal from these superstars and wondered if others like me shared the same sentiment. So, when eleventh grade came around, I dedicated my year-long study in AP Research to exploring how the androgyny of male K-pop idols influenced young Asian-American masculinity. Participants from across the U.S. and professors from around the world confirmed my assumptions: male K-pop idols' perceived gender fluidity is challenging heteronormativity, giving young Asian-American males a sense of freedom to experiment with masculinity. I scored a five.

In my attempt to understand the implications of K-pop boy bands, I was able to bring a sense of validation and closure to my participants but also to myself after years of insecurity. Thank you mom for watching that music video, and cheers to K-pop for allowing me to use your exuberance to begin the healing of Asian-American youth, following a history of racial stereotypes and inferiority complexes. With a more profound understanding of myself and others, I recognize my superpowers: whether it's leading my members in assisting students as president of Mu Alpha Theta or having my play about the Cambodian genocide professionally produced, I strive to always uplift marginalized communities in my endeavors and will continue to bring forth silenced issues to the limelight wherever I go.

Jayden Huynh-Vuong

Age: 17, Grade: 12

School Name: Glen Allen High School, Glen Allen, VA

Educator: Robert Meister

Category: Personal Essay & Memoir

A Self-Actualizing Awakening

Sifting through my elementary school's dusty shelves of books, I glanced at my classmate who had picked up one of Erin Hunter's *Warriors* novels. The vivid imagery of the pumpkin-colored cat, paired with pale gray stripes and emerald eyes, stood out to me. Since I had two cats at home, I was intrigued. "This could be the next one for me to read", I thought, excitedly, as a fourth grader. I had trouble connecting with texts if they didn't pique my interest; so, quite frequently, I would reject the mundane books my teachers offered and looked for something else. But, this one was extraordinary.

When she had returned the book to the shelf after reading the synopsis or whatever, I walked over and picked it up. Suddenly, I was met with a cold remark from my librarian as she peered over my shoulders: "Oh! You can't read that! That's not for you."

What? Why couldn't I read it? My classmate was having a grand ol' time enjoying the contents of the book. Why couldn't I? As I reflect on this experience from time to time, I ponder her justification. What was a valid reason to restrict an educational source from a fourth grader, especially if it furthers intellectual development? Isn't that the point of school? Oh, I know. There wasn't one. My classmate was white, and I was a person of color. The librarian was also white and well into her age, but chose to stop me from reading the book and not her. It just didn't add up.

Elementary school had the privilege of being first to break my perception of the world, and more importantly, the pride for my racial identity. I felt like I lost an aspect of my innocence. Jean Piaget's "Egocentric Theory" was completely thrown out the window. But, as a child, I grew up in the United States feeling indifferent as a minority -- that was until I surrounded myself with people who looked different. At home, my parents and sister supported and loved me unconditionally, although, we would have fights from time to time as typical of a normal family. Our arguments, however, did not reflect our divine appreciation for our Cambodian, Vietnamese, and Chinese heritage. We celebrated cultural traditions and feasted on the treasures of our cuisines. And, for a long time, this was all I've ever known. I was proud of who I was.

Why couldn't my classmates and teachers see the same beauty that I did? The beauty that I hold. Although most of my formative years of education were an average experience, I couldn't help contemplate the insults my classmates made about my facial features or their racial stereotypes. This resulted in a loss of confidence and fondness for my identity. At times, I would be reclusive of telling others what my ethnicity was, the languages I knew, or the foods that I ate. Although I'm aware that their questions were truly genuine, I perceived it as an attack to my already-crippling composition. I'm just as American as you, and that's all that matters.

I entered into a phase of trying to "Americanize" or "White-ify" myself in attempts to fit in with the other kids. I wouldn't dare to bring up my culture and tried to talk about topics majority-white, suburban children would be interested in: the new episode of *iCarly* or the multicolored trolls that sat on your shoulder, *Shoulder Buddies*. Little did I know would I neglect my ethnicity up to seventh grade.

Academically, the interaction with the librarian made me self-conscious of my abilities. It insinuated that I was intellectually inferior than my peers, and at that time, my grades were decent, but I figured decent wasn't enough. From elementary, I strived to earn the highest grades and accomplishments. I devoted extra time to studying, understanding the content, and going to teachers for help. Throughout middle school, it paid off, and I was making straight A's, a 4.0 GPA, while balancing year-round volleyball and extracurriculars. Reflecting, my ambition to excel in academics was rooted in an attempt to bring validation to my past scars. But, as I entered high school, I knew that academic achievements fueled by trauma and resentment would never bring me closure.

My parents are adamant about being the highest version of yourself and uplifting those around you. Being reminded of their words, I came to disdain how my personal drive centered around receiving solace for my belittlement in elementary school. I wanted my involvement in high school and future projects to mean something.

Something that, instead, brought awareness and empathy to marginalized communities. Still unclear about my moral compass, a playwriting opportunity presented itself during my sophomore theatre arts class. My grandfather had just passed away before the start of 2019, so I decided to dedicate my play to him and my mother.

While my classmates wrote about archetypal stories, depicting romance or heroic adventures, I based mine off of my mother's escape from the Cambodian genocide. It was a traumatic experience so harrowing and painful, I could see it in my mother's eyes as she recounted her memories, while I took notes. Most of my cousins around my age weren't aware of how frightening leaving one's country was in order to emigrate to the U.S. and much of the events have been unspoken in the American media. I had an epiphany one night as I was piecing together the story: if I can use this opportunity to educate and bring awareness to the horrors Cambodian immigrants had to face this will, not only contribute to the literature, but promote understanding for Asian-American immigrants.

I finished writing my play, and it flowered into a forty-minute emotional roller coaster, filled with magical realism and trauma-manifesting characters. I submitted *Red Butterfly* to SPARC's New Voices for the Theater, a Richmond theater company's playwriting and production program in January 2020 for the heck of it. Miraculously, a representative emailed me in May that I was selected as a winner out of 175 submissions to have their play produced, virtually. I told my family, and we jumped up and down, ecstatically. I looked into my mom's eyes, communicating without words, "This is it. I'm gonna tell your story to the world."

For two weeks during the summer, I worked with theater professionals and the other playwrights to revise my play and was assigned my own entourage of directors and actors to produce *Red Butterfly*. Seeing the widening eyes of my peers, actors, and teachers as they consumed the content was revelatory. Although we'll never be able to fathom what my parents endured, I was able to connect this story with people throughout the east coast. The night of the performance was life-changing. I sat in front of my computer, frozen and speechless, as I watched the audience turn their cameras back on, applauding the actors who finished the virtual production. In my head, the memories of bullying and racism juxtaposed the viewers' celebration of my mother's story. I felt a wave of closure engulf my entire body.

Through this experience, I became aware of my soul purpose on this planet: utilizing my academic strengths and advocacy to bring justice to oppressed groups. I can connect people through my projects to raise awareness and promote empathy for others who look different than us. And for the individuals who made me feel small and weak, thank you for teaching me that I do indeed matter. My identity and interests have always been justified. As I walk through this nuanced world as a proud person of color, I see clearly that the belittled and bullied matter the most, for it is our mission to uplift those around us to build a more inclusive and unconditionally loving community. That is our mission as the guardians of this planet and bearers of unity and peace.

Jayden Huynh-Vuong

Age: 17, Grade: 12

School Name: Glen Allen High School, Glen Allen, VA

Educator: Alyssa Shevchuk

Category: Critical Essay

It's Time to Retrain the Kitchen Staff

The LGBTQ+ community has been shimmering in the American limelight for the past few decades, advocating for gender identity acceptance and challenging the heteronormative construct. Their persistence to fight tooth and nail, using a grandeur of protests, truly express the necessity to shower social justice and equal rights on LGBTQ+ individuals. While there have been numerous legislations that recognize their rights (thanks, Obama) and a growing cultural awareness, the American justice system is failing to keep up with societal stepping-stones. It's unacceptable and extremely ironic. Prison and courts' LGBTQ+ exclusion, coupled with higher instances of harassment, cry out the immediate need for reformations to protect this marginalized group.

The movements to support LGBTQ+ rights have been reflecting a growing acceptance in our culture; however, within courts and prisons, it seems to be going backwards. This community has fought against suffocating discrimination and have taken responsibility to voice the violation of human rights, exercising self-initiative and defining what it means to be an American citizen. Identity acceptance and gender fluidity have been emphasized nation-wide through "Gay Pride Parades", LGBTQ+ protests, and other events that aim to celebrate a diversity of sexualities. Popular television shows such as the seven seasons and running Orange is the New Black depicts lesbian relations in prison and injects LGBTQ awareness in American media. In addition, key legislations such as the Supreme Court's ruling to legalize same-sex marriage in Obergefell v. Hodges has made a coveted reality true for many, while simultaneously, striking down the infamous "Defense of Marriage Act" ... thank, god!

However, according to a study published by the University of Miami Law School, lawyer Michael D. Braunstein exposes five stages of LGBTQ+ discrimination in the American justice system. He states, "[the] discrimination against those who do not identify as 'heterosexual' reaches far deeper than the right to marry" and signifies "biased treatment by law enforcement officers and a lack of accommodations or protections within the courts or prison systems" as major instances. It was also addressed that many LGBTQ+ victims were frequently targeted for committing "vice" crimes such as prostitution which wrongfully singles out transgender women and LGBTQ+ youth.

Hold up. We need to recognize that these groups most likely do not have a reliable access to daily necessities, high quality education, and consistent family support. Yet, instead of trying to assist them by providing opportunities or educating why their choices were wrong, we instead convict them of "vice" crimes and send them to ruthless prisons to be violated that crap out of. Police who improperly utilize their "use of discretion", coupled with vague justifications, allows for manipulation of corrupt power against minorities (Braunstein). In Bryan Stevenson's Just Mercy, a book that exposes numerous injustices within the American justice system, this recurring theme of police prejudice against impoverished minorities is also demonstrated in Marsha Colbey's case. Colbey was an extremely poor, pregnant mother who could not afford proper prenatal care; she gave birth to a stillborn baby and had buried the body in the backyard. However, the court deemed the baby's death as murder, after blaming her destitute living conditions and failure to seek medical care. Again, it's invigorating because these are uncontrollable factors that disadvantage the poor and feed on the vulnerability of women in poverty. Our justice system is clearly regressing and cannot pick up on social cues. Take the hints! Get on our level.

Once in prison, LGBTQ+ inmates are experiencing harassment and abuse incomparable to the "general population" of prisoners – aka the heterosexuals. Anyone who is not straight or appears divergent from the typical gender binary is ultimately more vulnerable and at a higher risk of being targeted by other prisoners. In a study conducted by the UCLA School of Law, LGBTQ+ victims are "incarcerated at disproportionately high rates" and are "more likely to experience mistreatment, harsh punishment, and sexual victimization" than the general population. This supports my previous claim of LGBTQ+ minorities being discriminated by the police as the number of those being sent to prison is greater than their heterosexual counterparts.

Are we still denying that homophobic and anti-LGBTQ+ sentiments don't exist? Also, the National Center for

Transgender Equality released a document, detailing statistics of sexual assault LGBTQ+ inmates face. They state, “transgender people are nearly ten times more likely to be sexually assaulted”, and LGBTQ+ prisoners “were approximately three times as likely to report sexual abuse as other prisoners”. Again, this marginalized group is facing a greater amount of sexual harassment and abuse than those who are heterosexual. Drawing back to Marsha Colbey, she documents her time at Tutwiler Women’s Prison as being a dangerous place where a plethora of female inmates were sexually abused by officers. So, why hasn’t there been any change to protect these minorities? What exactly needs to change?

Considering most of the harassment and sexual violation is a result of contact with other inmates, a solution would be to have separate or isolated living conditions. In Just Mercy, another marginalized group would be young juveniles who are incarcerated in adult prisons. In the case of “Charlie”, a fourteen-year-old black boy who shoots his mother’s boyfriend out of resentment for his abusive nature, he is tried as a “dangerous adult” and sent to an adult jail. However, Charlie’s young age and petite physique, thrown into a batch of prisoners who are stronger and older, makes him a vulnerable and easy target for predators. Charlie is raped frequently, leaving him traumatized and broken. These situations justify why removing vulnerable, marginalized groups away from potentially dangerous prisoners will help to protect them. Whether that is through separate cells, shower facilities, eating areas, etc., these small changes can dramatically reduce the number of sexual assault instances and other moments of danger for these LGBTQ+ prisoners. However, this will require actual, physical reconstruction to prisons, and if we’re talking about implementing this throughout the whole U.S., this will need a buttload of resources, financial support, and cooperation from all levels of prison authority.

More ways to protect LGBTQ+ prisoners would be to train and educate law enforcement authorities in order to elevate their understanding of these marginalized groups and establish a communication system for inmates to vocalize distress. By reforming the curriculum for training police officers and prison guards, we can cultivate a new and improved perspective of LGBTQ+ needs and emphasize their well-being. Referencing Braunstein’s study again, his solutions similarly talk about reforming the law enforcement curriculum. He advises implementing required “trainings on diversity and tolerance ... early on” in order to increase empathy and eliminate victimization of LGBTQ+ persons. It is crucial that this training becomes effective immediately across the country and is strictly monitored to prevent this whole monstrosity from happening again. Also, by organizing a system of communication where inmates can document inappropriate conduct, this can expose prisoners or prison guards in order to address problems faster. This will enforce good behavior and accountability by both groups.

While the American culture is slowly changing to accommodate all minorities, our justice system is still a negative, one-star restaurant that serves injustice instead of justice. It’s time to retrain the kitchen staff. Although LGBTQ+ prisoners have been disproportionately incarcerated, mistreated by law enforcement officers, and violently attacked in prisons, we can implement solutions that’ll increase their protection by reforming the police curriculum and giving them the opportunity to self-advocate. We’ve absolutely no excuse to fix this problem. While my classmates have disagreed with me, exclaiming, “They’re in jail for a reason. They deserve it”, no person should experience senseless violence based on their identity. It’s a basic human right. Instead, let’s focus on promoting rehabilitation and self-actualization, rather than turning a blind eye to the oppressed.

Jayden Huynh-Vuong

Age: 17, Grade: 12

School Name: Glen Allen High School, Glen Allen, VA

Educator: Alyssa Shevchuk

Category: Critical Essay

When Will Schools Reach Out a Helping Hand?

As the 21st century birthed an era of children unlike no other, mental health is becoming a prominent struggle that is characterizing this generation of teenagers. This national crisis is causing high school students to experience a plethora of ailments invisible to the eye. Literally, I've seen peers on the verge of balling and have read Instagram posts of mental breakdowns longer than the Constitution. What can I do to help them? I don't know what to do! These occurrences of mental burn-out are becoming the "norm" for teens as the Pew Research Center shows an alarming number of teens with depression and other kinds of mental illness. Students who are turning to "risk behaviors" such as alcohol or drugs could be experiencing a hell of a world that is tearing them apart. Is the American culture emphasizing the importance of mental health enough, and to what extent is our education system accommodating students are questions that demand to be at the forefront of our discussions.

School is a highly impactful and widely consuming part of teenagers' lives. What children are taught builds their identity, perception of the world, as well as skills and values that carry on into adulthood. Simultaneously, if the education system neglects the importance of mental health alongside physical safety, this will create a notion of stigma and ignorance among students. Possible consequences of this are already being reflected by the rising number of high school students dealing with depression, anxiety, stress, etc (Pew Research Center). Every day, I bump into a classmate who's desperately crying out for help -- help for some sort of guidance and navigation through their many mountains. However, schools are reluctant to give a helping hand, and the students themselves, while experiencing similar worries, are stranded fish flopping on a beach before a tsunami comes crashing in; they don't know how to advise and/or console each other.

It's indisputable that the crisis of mental health is becoming more prominent in teenagers. Those who still have the audacity to believe mental illness to still be a myth – I'm talking about you, Thomas Szasz – need to face the studies and percentages developed by credible research institutions and universities. They are screaming at us to recognize that our ignorance of mental illness is harming our children. According to the Pew Research Center, "13% of U.S. teens ages 12 to 17 (or 3.2 million) ... experienced at least one major depressive episode in the past year" in 2017. While the number of cases of teenagers who experienced depression increased by a whopping 59% from 2007 to 2017 (Pew Research Center). Other research centers also support the abnormal rise of teens with mental illnesses. The facts are present. The public education system needs to overcome their stubbornness and see the children who suffer alone through defeating times. If schools fail to heed the alarming numbers produced by research centers, what else is needed to engender change? Students attacking one another or harming themselves? – certainly not. The United States has already been presented with the truth, but who will initiate action?

Through a local perspective, my middle and high school are not effectively preparing students to manage problems with mental health. Throughout my experiences, the issue was rarely emphasized, and resources were unknown to the general student body. Hungary Creek Middle, a time where adolescence sprouts, exhibited 3 years where the faculty and counseling departments did not encourage a word of being mentally healthy. Unless going directly to counseling behind closed doors, in the public mind, mental illness was a topic unspoken and unfortunately, began to build a community of students who were unaware of how to approach their personal troubles. At Glen Allen High, there have been a few moments of awareness and programs that try to promote mental health such as Building a Culture of Kindness, a program similar to Big Brothers & Big Sisters and Equity Ambassadors, a channel of advocacy designed to amplify students' voices. However, B.A.C.K. is only applied to freshmen homerooms, and E.A. only issues presentations once or twice a month. It's frightening that the student and faculty culture in G.A.H.S. seems to remain silent; teachers perpetuate the crisis, developing stigmas among the students. However, my experiences cannot generalize that of every middle and high school, and I am aware of the legal confidentiality requirements that teachers uphold. But these are not reasons that dismiss us from adding mental health to the forefront of priorities among sports and academic responsibility to actively discuss what it means to be mentally

healthy.

High schools, including Glen Allen, need the collaboration of the counselors and faculty to actively and consistently communicate the importance of mental health to students. From the moment students walk into freshmen orientation to when they graduate, mental well-being as well as emotional intelligence must be delivered by teachers and student-run programs throughout the school years in order to remedy the stigmatized student culture. This will aid in promoting definitions, causes and effects, as well as symptoms of mental illness, so that students will have the knowledge to identify mental stressors as well as the courage and support to seek school resources. When my sister, who is currently at Virginia Commonwealth University, was at G.A.H.S., she wished that teachers and counselors placed more emphasis on educating students. She feels that if her classmates were to be more open and talked about mental illness, that would have emboldened her to pursue counseling help.

In addition, more programs and classes such as B.A.C.K. and E.A. that focus on the well-being of students need to be added to a weekly agenda or create specialized classes that educate students of all grades without a burdening workload. A more informal option would be to establish one-on-one readily accessible therapy sessions, allowing students to express their dilemmas without experiencing the ordeal of hackling down an appointment with a counselor. These plans would ultimately require the help of teachers, students, and counselors. However, a lack of funding for additional counselors could explain why Henrico County Public Schools haven't already implemented this. But, isn't the safety of students schools' number one priority? 1900 students with only five counselors doesn't seem safe. We practice safety drills and unfortunately, hide-and-locks to prepare for on-campus shooters. But, mental health deserves just as much attention as the human psyche is just as fragile as any other body part.

In order to analyze the angle of Glen Allen High counselors, I conducted a short, thirty-minute interview with my guidance counselor, who I will refer to as Mrs. Brendan for the sake of protecting her identity. I got into contact with her by requesting an appointment via their new Tinyurl submission forum that was advertised in my school's weekly newsletter. How handy – sounds like a great place to advertise help! In our conversation, the key points Mrs. Brendan dictated were that there are programs that G.A.H.S. offers to assist those undergoing mental conditions. Including "mental health week" and "mindful Mondays", students who meet with counselors are being taught to handle stress and anxiety compounded by social media and school as well as offer strategies on how to "take a deep breath" from life's pressures (Brendan). Henrico County even offers a facility of medical professionals dedicated to providing students with mental health resources and has plans for students in need of a medical leave of absence.

This was the first time I was hearing this. This is where the root of the issue lies: the absence of communication and awareness. Schools are silent; furthermore, teens aren't aware that there are trained counselors dedicated to guiding students and medical professionals who are licensed to assist their troubles. Think of how comforting it would be to know your community and school has your back. Mrs. Brendan also indicates that "mental health is not stigmatized": Glen Allen High has a "supportive student body" and a "great faculty/staff development" who dedicate their lives to nurturing fine students. While this may be true, then it shouldn't be difficult to implement plans of change to save students' lives.

In contrast to the stressful lives high school students live, schools have the potential to bring a sense of reassurance and ease. By actively promoting awareness of signs of mental illness and encouraging students to seek available resources, this will help to change the stigmatized student and faculty culture and pave the way for a new community – one where students support each other and advocate for the well-being of all. We can facilitate this through teachers, counselors, classes, as well as recommend Henrico County's own medical professional support. The resources are certainly there, and schools absolutely have the potential to execute this. It's the initiative to circumvent this change throughout the county that seems to be difficult. If students' safety is the number one priority, and the American culture is changing to accommodate mental illness, what are we afraid of?

Jayden Huynh-Vuong

Age: 17, Grade: 12

School Name: Glen Allen High School, Glen Allen, VA

Educator: Alyssa Shevchuk

Category: Critical Essay

The Beauty of America: Her Inharmony

Mixture, diversity, fusion – these are words that can be used to describe America’s ethnographic and cultural composition. A “melting pot” that is expanding to include a conglomeration of different ethnicities, languages, and cultures. According to Thomas Paine, these puzzle pieces of America are highlighted by an omnipresent sense of “cordial unison”, where previous fights for independence have protected this country’s social and political well-being. However, Paine, most likely a wealthy, straight, white male, was living in a late 18th century reality; his definitions on equality and social justice would differ from those of a 21st century American society. His characterization of the U.S. – to an extent is true in some respects – but fails to explain major issues such as the immense socioeconomic disparity between the rich and growing poverty and the oppression of the LGTBQ+ community. But the public education system allows people of different backgrounds and cultures to interact with each other, exemplifying Paine’s vision of concordance.

The American lower class seems to be spiraling down a black hole of financial deficit as the socioeconomic gap between the rich and poor is broadening. The constant questions of how am I going to get food or how to maintain the roof over my head are daily worries that plague the minds of the lower class. In Paine’s characterization of America, “the poor are not oppressed, the rich are not privileged” is the exact opposite of what is occurring today. According to the Pew Research Center, the number of Americans under the poverty line soared 40.6 million in 2017, and in congruence with previous years, this number is steadily increasing. This is not good, duh. As a society, we cannot keep neglecting the absurd population that’s living under nothing but cobwebs and dust! According to the *New York Times*, the study by the Government Accountability Office is reasoning longevity is connected to wealth. Yeah, that’s right, it means “rich people are living longer but the [poor person’s] life expectancy is actually shrinking compared to their parents” (Romig). This is unbelievable. People who are not as financially stable are suffering because it – literally dying earlier – because we, as a country, have not come to a consensus on how to handle one of the most prominent embarrassments of our nation. If we are not giving more financial benefits to those in need, how are we going to alleviate this Mariana’s Trench of a gap?

Although America has made milestones with the LGBTQ+ community, such as Obama’s legalization of gay marriage (yay Obama), there are still many forms of unresolved oppression directed at the group. On the topic of LGBTQ+ rights, their equality in the workplace as well as safety in social environments is still up for question. Although the “Title VII” of the Civil Rights Act of 1964, was supposed to prohibit “discrimination on the basis of gender identity” in terms of acquiring a job, a recent study from UCLA reveals that LGBTQ+ individuals have “reported much higher rates of being bullied, fired, or denied a job, promotion, or lease compared with heterosexual people” (Green). More and more studies are proving the presence of a hidden homophobic/anti-LGBTQ+ sentiment in aspects of American society. While Paine suggests “there is nothing to engender riots and tumults”, it seems that because of the discrimination and harassment the community receives, there are even more protests and riots expressed by the group. I know there are numerous gay pride parades across the country where LGBTQ+ individuals are exhibiting their pride and confidence. But the fact that the community feels the need to organize these parades and protests implies equality still has not been reached for those who are LGBTQ+.

While there is a list of issues that make America unharmonious, the public education system is a current example that supports Paine’s idea of concordance. In his passage, Paine speaks of how the United States’s *Declaration of Independence* and *Constitution* have allowed people of different languages, ethnicities, and religions to live peacefully together. In the 21st century, the public education system has been a reflection of the many races that live in America. Public schools have opened their doors to educate all children regardless of who they are and has given them an equal opportunity at acquiring a fair education. In my experience from pre-school to high school, I’ve noticed my classrooms are diverse with kids of all ethnic and religious backgrounds. It has truly enhanced my quality of learning and awareness for different cultures. In addition, schools are teaching children about

events and history of other religions and cultures other than Christianity and have resources for students whose religion requires them to pray during the school day. Schools are the perfect vessel to teach students to avoid issues that plague society such as LGBTQ+ discrimination and the disparity between socioeconomic classes. The education system's ability to bring together children regardless of background epitomizes America's nickname: the "melting pot".

Thomas Paine's revolutionary works influenced the *Declaration of Independence*, notable for dictating "all men are created equal". However, his logic honestly makes me laugh, considering slavery and women's inequality were massive problems present in American life at the time of his *Rights of Man* piece. A few centuries later, here we are in the 21st century ... and there are still issues of social injustice that keep us from living in Paine's vision of concordance. The expanding income gap between the rich and the poor as well as the ongoing discrimination of the LGBTQ+ community are moments in American culture that still need resolution. However, America has made some leaps and bounds with the public education system that stuffs children of all ethnicities and religions in one classroom to learn about each other. In all honestly, I don't think the U.S. will ever reach 100% harmony. That's calling for perfection – and America isn't perfect. But that's the beauty of our country. From day one, we have always been figuring out ways to bring amends to the problems that disturb our peace. America is perseverant and has a spirit that is not harmonious but rather relentless.

Yasmeen Jaaber

Age: 18, Grade: 12

School Name: Appomattox Regional Governor's School, Chesterfield, VA

Educator: Cindy Cunningham

Category: Poetry

The Politics of Paw Patrol

prologue.

it's hard to lift eyelids
with brain power alone.
when everything about the world is silent
except for mother's footsteps in the hallway
as she eats cold risotto
out of plastic tupperware.
eyelids are uninterested in vanity,
not particularly motivated to do
bench presses
so mornings get easier. it's much more comfortable
to remain closed.

act one.

fat, heavy, tongue lying limp
on the floor of mouth. she's sleeping.
not woman, not man, but she.
sleeping in a way that surrenders
tension of the tongue,
but not the back
not the neck
not the shoulders.
and when her eyelids lift
with brain power alone
she lets the sun warm her mind.
she hears the buzz of television.
she hears what would've been
transmissions
on an early morning in 2009.
she hears the bright sounds of paw patrol.
she thinks of how her brother
would like to be called alex.

intermission.

they ought to hear you when you speak.
i wish my name was alex.
alex! my character's name is alex.
who is even named
bilal?
i put alex as the name.
i put alex instead of
bilal.

act two.

she hears the sounds of paw patrol. she thinks of 2009.
she wonders if a political analysis of paw patrol is useful.
are the dog cops bad as well?
All
Dog
Cops
Are
Bastards.
is it useful
to critique the youth targeted propaganda
or the fact that none of the characters were named
bilal.
but they were named
marshall and
chase and
jake and alex.
she wonders if a political analysis of paw patrol is useful.
she wonders why they couldn't have named
alex, bilal.

reprise.

is she always a woman?
when do women feel like women?
when breasts are cupped on a honey-smelling couch on new years eve?
when legs are too fat to wear a skirt?
when mascara smudges, and she/her/hers likes the feel of disaster?
do women cry when they see themselves naked?
does she/her/hers cry when she thinks too hard about
neutrality versus
deliberate existence?
she/her/hers exists on the edge of the grand canyon.
she/her/hers has never been deliberate about
anything once in her life.

epilogue.

it's easier to think at night. chasing the clock.
beating the sunrise in a literal way
with boxing gloves and typewriters.
waiting for the anticipation of night to end
and the warmth of sun
to activate 2009.
or something similar.

Ronit Jain

Age: 17, Grade: 11

School Name: Maggie L Walker Governor's School, Richmond, VA

Educator: Lisa Williams

Category: Flash Fiction

Nameless

The man ambled out of the parking lot, his expletives piercing through the night sky as the bartender firmly locked the doors shut. His mind free and pockets loose, he swaggered to his truck, his eyes haphazardly glazed and unfocused. It took all his effort to heave open the truck door and clamber into the front seat. Then he collapsed. Straight down and out of the truck on the icy snowy ground next to the beat-up tire. He got off one muffled cry for help before he drifted out of focus. No one would come.

As he lay there, the cold and alcohol slowly ebbing away his being, his otherwise lonely life seemed to flash before his eyes. The basketball career he once foresaw in his youth had now become a mere blip in his rearview mirror. He had gotten into the game from a young age, mainly because he was a tall, lanky kid who had some athleticism. Unsurprisingly, he excelled early, setting school records and lettering in varsity while not even being in high school. Yet, as the newspaper articles and highlight reels ramped up, so did his ego and his youth. He sometimes ran these events back through his mind, wondering how it would've turned out had he chosen differently. What if he hadn't fled from those flashing blue lights, high after another meaningless party with a bunch of meaningless people. What if he had taken school seriously, learning how to manage his success? But he didn't. And never would. A busted knee and another DUI later, he was done. No more scholarships. No more parties. No more of anything for him.

His mother had died a year after the knee injury; heart attack, they said. His father had never consistently been around for his life and took his mother's death as an opportunity to leave. As for him, well, what was there to do? He had no degree, no direction, no sense of how to live his life. Eventually, he found solace in the bottom of a bottle, barely keeping his head afloat while drowning in his sorrows. He had briefly thought about seeking help but laughed off that notion, chiding himself for showing weakness and vulnerability. As time went on, he grew tired of the sympathetic faces looking at him as he walked down the street, picking up trash on the side of the road to serve his parole. So he ran. Ran away from the failures and all the people he thought he let down. Ran away to escape the demons that continued to hound him until his final breath. Ran away to lead a life that he didn't think was worth living. He continued to hop around the country, from town to town, door-to-door, but never really feeling at home or safe. He longed for a hearth, a place to talk and laugh and joke, but was unable to find one.

So as his eyes drooped shut on that desolate night on that icy ground, he succumbed once again to his greatest enemy: himself. He had experienced pain that cut deeper than the sharpest knife and realized that it was too late for him to change and make things better. As he shuttered out his last breath, he did it with dissatisfaction, knowing he would remain lost forever. Later on, I would hear about him, in the middle of a warm May evening as I inevitably crammed last-minute for my AP Psychology Exam. *75% of depression is left untreated* I glanced at it, shrugged, then moved onto the next point. That one moment encompassed how society treats those who struggle with mental illness. Depression is more or less viewed as a statistic for the general public and those who experience it are subconsciously viewed as outcasts. Yet, these issues continue to persist in our society and as he died that night, he did so similar to how he lived: cold, afraid, and alone.

Aiden Jun

Age: 15, Grade: 10

School Name: Deep Run High School, Glen Allen, VA

Educator: Mia Tambellini

Category: Poetry

Déjà vu

Déjà vu

he struggled to open his drowsy eyes
from working long hours
struggled to look up at the weak sun
trying to break through his streaked window

same as yesterday

he slowly dragged his heavy soul
out of his moth-eaten bed
looking to comfort his empty stomach

he opened the yellowed fridge door
found a milk carton
and dried up chicken
from several nights ago

he didn't bother
to check their expiration dates
he already knew the answer

he put on a jacket
went out the door
the late morning breeze struck him

he walked down Lincoln street
entered a small convenience store
greeted by the short, balding owner

he bought a carton of eggs
and a pack of cigarettes

he scurried out
back onto the street
walked towards home

hey jared...

he looked back
at the man behind him

it was his classmate

from high school

...what have you been up to?

the same as always
jared replied back

they walked one block
together
not having anything to talk about
as nothing new had changed since high school days

they departed
relieved that the awkward silence was over

as he arrived back at his apartment
he went up multiple staircases

he opened the door
unsurprised by the view ahead of him
the lamp was still on the table
the dirty cups were still stacked
everything was still the same

same as yesterday

Aiden Jun

Age: 15, Grade: 10

School Name: Deep Run High School, Glen Allen, VA

Educator: Mia Tambellini

Category: Poetry

Moth

Moth

he crept out the back door
paying no attention to the screech of the ungreased hinges

he was sure his mother heard
but not a sound came from her room
her liver full of cheap gas station beer
once again

he walked down Belleview Avenue
cautious of every step
he matched his footsteps to the slow rhythm of his heart
and swayed his arms back and forth

the wind blew through his fingers
he stared at the lamp post
and counted the moths flying around the fuzzy light

they were attracted to the
warmth of the light

jealous
he too wanted to feel the warmth
and so he reached down into his pockets
fished around
found a week old blunt that he had stolen from his mother

his lighter was running dead
but with a few strikes
he cured it

he took a long drag
feeling the grainy texture against his teeth
and waited for his lungs to fill up with warm smoke

he felt something
it was a change of pace from his normal life

whether it was sadness
euphoria
anger

he felt something
and that he enjoyed

he was a moth
trying to enter the light
not knowing that it
would eventually be the death of him
too

Sumner Kerr

Age: 14, Grade: 8

School Name: St Catherine's School, Richmond, VA

Educator: Julie Elmore

Category: Short Story

Bobby

Four years and one month. That was the time since Robert Caraway had passed away in a car crash along this specific road. Emily Caraway gripped her hands more tightly on the wheel, knowing the dangers of driving in these mountains at night. Every flash of gleaming deer eyes along the road meant trouble. Her son, Will's, soft murmuring and the wind whooshing outside the car were the only noises they heard. *Just get to the house.*

Both knew they were close. This trip was just one of the thousands they had taken to their mountain home, yet it seemed so different. Different without Robert. His love for the property was the only reason Emily Caraway decided to go. Not taking this annual trip meant forgetting, an unwanted risk for Will and Emily, the family left behind.

Will was only eight, but he understood that his father was gone. They would never share special jokes or talk about things that a mother just couldn't understand. His awareness of Robert's death almost upset Emily. She wanted her innocent son back, just as much as she wanted her husband alive again.

Robert's demise took a great toll on both mother and son, and they had different ways of handling their sorrowful feelings. Emily refused to succumb to heartbreak. Instead, she did normal activities she knew Robert would have wanted. Will coped using distraction with a new friend named Bobby, whom he met not long after the accident. Bobby and Will played together constantly, and if Will felt happy, so did Emily. But it unsettled her that his friend's name was Bobby, as it had been her nickname for Robert.

Of all the names, it had to be Bobby she thought, but she brushed that aside.

Before the trip, Will begged his mother to let Bobby come. Similar to any other child, he swore to behave and insisted that he needed his friend. Wanting a family vacation, his mother hesitated, but she finally submitted, and Bobby joined them.

Currently, the friends sat in the back of the car, Will singing his road trip song to Bobby. As their minivan crested a slope, the top of their mountain home came into view, and Will's singing escalated with his excitement. The radio crackled in the car, and Will fell silent as the announcer's monotone voice filled the small space.

"The Local Weather Forecast for Silverthorne, Colorado, has issued a severe winter weather warning for the next week. Expect heavy snow, sleet, or ice, and prepare for emergency circumstances. Travelers driving through the mountains should take caution and try to stay close to home."

With this announcement, Emily Caraway's already tight grip on the wheel turned deadly. Almost on cue, the wind picked up and tore at the final bridge they were driving across, making it sway precariously. Will, oblivious to the ominous forecast, cried out to his friend, "That's our house!" as they pulled up the drive.

Moments later, they parked and unpacked, ready to stay cozy inside during the snowy weekend.

The weather outside *was* frightful, but inside the warm lodge, the smell of cookies and happy memories kept everyone's mood light. Enjoying their time together, Will and Bobby ran through the house, exploring everything from the deer antlers on the wall, to the ancient pair of skies that passed down through the Caraway family for generations. Emily also explored, but for the sake of nostalgia. Every room in the house brought a remembrance of better times.

If an onlooker had been in the mountains, they would have seen the little lodge glowing from its nook between the snow-covered pines. Such a place made the occupants never want to leave. The relaxing weekend spent at the mountain home had gone smoothly. The trip helped Emily and Will to focus less on their sorrow, and more on the joyful times they had with Robert. Yet, the time passed by in a blink of an eye, and soon enough it was time for Emily, Will, and Bobby to depart.

"Mom, can't we just stay a few more days?" Will argued.

Emily explained, "I wish we could, but I have a job to get back to honey, and we don't want to get snowed in!"

Will cleverly tried to counter, "The snow proves we should stay! It could be dangerous on the roa--"

"I know," Emily interrupted, "But, we have to get home tonight."

The fidgeting of her fingers gave away the nerves she hid under a brave face, but Will knew better than to argue at this point. They packed up their belongings, locked the door, and climbed into the car. No singing occurred as they left the house, as the departure was far from a celebration. An audible sigh was heard as they turned out of the drive and onto the dark, snowy road.

After driving for an hour, the chattering and moving in the back of the car faded away to the sound of sleep. Emily was left alone with her thoughts. Times like these, with no distractions, made her worry the most. That was the reason she tried to keep so busy - doubt wouldn't overwhelm her. Raising Will alone caused her great stress, as she knew there were things that only Robert could have provided for him. She thought of what she and Robert would have been discussing on the ride home.

Work, travel, friends, Will's latest antics. Bobby Emily supposed, chuckling to herself. Thinking of him, she turned back to check on Will, who peacefully slept with one arm outstretched for the game he had been playing with Bobby. *And that I need to keep my eyes on the road*

But by the time she turned around, it was too late.

A deer stood frozen in the road with its eyes glued to the minivan's headlights, and her frantic swerve of the wheel caused the car to skid over the ice and flip. Life moved in slow motion as the passengers' worlds went upside down, their screams sounding distant and senses numb. The car crashed into a ditch on the side of the road. The abrupt silence was deafening, other than the ominous sound of dripping coming from the engine. The passengers went black.

The car, overturned in the ditch, kept its headlights on toward the sky as a final plea for help. Shattered glass glistened in the snow, and the overwhelming smell of gasoline choked the air. Emily groggily took in her surroundings, then her instincts kicked in. She desperately unbuckled herself, falling into an uncomfortable position. Reaching back to pull out Will, she cut herself but didn't feel pain. The only thing that mattered was getting her son out of the car. Emily refused to let go of him as she dragged Will through the window and away from the wreck.

She stopped when the gasoline smell started to clear her head and the world became less foggy. As the cold air brushed her face, Emily became aware of the warm blood dripping from her forehead and passed out, relieved for their safety.

Will, miraculously unharmed, sat on the icy ground sobbing beside his mother as the snow piled up around him. Tires screeched and he looked up to see a man running toward him.

"Kid, are you ok? Is that your mother?" he questioned.

Still shell-shocked, Will could barely speak. "Y-yes, but my fr-fr-friend..." he blubbered.

The new stranger, trying to calm the blotchy child, spoke in a slow voice. "I've called 911 and there will be people here to help soon. You stay right here while they arrive. Now, I need you to tell me if there is anyone else in that car," gesturing to the jumbled wreck.

"M-my friend is-is," Will hiccuped, tears streaming.

The man jumped up and ran toward the car, his feet pulled down by the dense snow. Ripping open the smashed door, he peered inside for signs of life.

Yards away, Emily became conscious. She saw the man bent over at the wreck, desperately searching.

"Get away from the crash, the gasoline could ignite!" she screamed.

The determined man didn't turn his head, still looking.

Will suddenly cried, "Bobby-"

The car exploded.

Emily fell to her knees wailing, "No, no, no... not another," she repeated weakly. "Not another good man who gave his life for nothing."

"But, he saved Bobby," Will said.

Emily choked back a sob and clutched her son, and, minutes later, when the ambulance with wailing sirens pulled up, they were still in that position. Just two figures, clutching each other, alone in the clearing.

Ala Killen

Age: 15, Grade: 10

School Name: Maggie L Walker Governor's School, Richmond, VA

Educator: Jeff Hall

Category: Poetry

Stardust and Things

They say we're made of stardust.
All things made of the rest.
If this is truly true,
I think that that's the best.
For I am partly made
From the armor of the tallest tree
The water from the fastest creek
The pearls from the deepest sea.
If I am made of all these things
Which would be great to be,
Then I am made of
All the earth,
And all the earth
Is me.

Ala Killen

Age: 15, Grade: 10

School Name: Maggie L Walker Governor's School, Richmond, VA

Educator: Jeff Hall

Category: Poetry

The Darkness Beneath the Dirt

This world is not complete pitch black
or awful blinding crystal white.

It's not completely dark at night
nor is it only bitter light.

For those who walk it, it is both,
just dim enough for our shadows

To look quite like our monsters.

Uncanny likeness but who knows?

Natalie Koehn-wu

Age: 14, Grade: 8

School Name: Maggie L Walker Governor's School, Richmond, VA

Educator: Michele Surat

Category: Short Story

The Perfect Smile

The dentist liked her smile. He liked it very much. The more he looked at those pearly whites over the check-in desk, the more he liked them. He didn't pay much attention to the woman attached to those lovely teeth, transfixed on their perfection. The owner of the teeth must've asked to be shown to the back room because his receptionist tugged gently on his sleeve to pull him from his stupor.

He still felt quite hazy as he led the woman back to his operation room, automatically going through his typical small talk as they walked. If the dentist was completely honest, he did not remember a moment of the conversation they shared or if it made any sense in the slightest. The shining teeth were ingrained in his memory like a brand on his brain.

When they reached the room, he pulled out his papers and tried his best to focus on the task ahead. He wasn't entirely sure but he assumed this visit would be a usual check-up. No one with teeth that spectacular could be in his office for any other reason.

He tried to tell her to lay back on the chair for her check up, but she became annoyed with him. In his haze had he missed something? She insisted on pills. What kind? The dentist couldn't remember. She took many more than the dentist would have recommended. They were small, white, and she gulped them down past those perfect teeth. Somewhere in the dentist's foggy brain, he knew he should protest but her beauty left him mute at her insistence. He watched as she slowly fell into a deep sleep. He assumed she wished to have a cavity filled or simply disliked the dentist's office. He didn't hold it against her. Many people did not like the strange metal tools dentists used. Finally, when he felt that she would not be able to feel the drill on what he assumed was a rotten tooth, he gently opened her mouth.

At first, he was still in his stupor. It took him a few moments to focus on what lay before him. Behind those perfectly shiny front teeth, he saw black. The dentist rubbed his eyes, wondering if perhaps he wasn't seeing things correctly. He was right.

It wasn't black behind those perfect teeth. There was certainly something there. The dentist let out a loud squeak of fear as he finally came out of whatever trance he had been in.

Worms. Thousands of worms. They writhed at the back of her mouth bursting from the seams of her gums and from her throat, covered in a red liquid that the dentist quickly realized was the woman's blood. The worms were not simply residing in the woman's mouth, they were eating away at her flesh.

Now the dentist could see clearly. The woman was not beautiful at all. Her skin all over her body sagged and squirmed. From her hollowed eyes she cried tears of blood. The dentist watched in horror as her body split open, worms and blood spilling across his perfectly white floor. The worms seemed to reach for him; hungry still for another taste of flesh.

It was only then that the dentist thought to scream and he opened his mouth only to feel worms already crawling within and wriggling into his body through the fabric of his clothes. He could no longer scream, could no longer control his body as they ate into his brain. The dentist fought for only a moment longer before suddenly, his daze returned. It was so much stronger this time, such a nice alternative to all the pain he'd felt just moments before. The dentist fully embraced it.

Across the room, he made eye contact with himself in the mirror and smiled. His perfect teeth beamed back at him. Oh, yes. The dentist was going to give every patient his perfect smile.

Alexandra La Civita

Age: 15, Grade: 10

School Name: Manchester High School, Midlothian, VA

Educator: Rebecca Lynch

Category: Short Story

Goddess of Beauty

Again and again, Silvanus chipped away at the stone. He smoothed out the rough edges to form the illusion of soft skin, chiseled the marble away and into something lifelike. The process was painstakingly slow, requiring a still hand and a meticulous eye. He couldn't make a single mistake, or else his art was ruined and he would have to start from scratch.

It had cost him days and days, but Silvanus had finally finished his newest masterpiece. The man stepped back to admire his handiwork, sweat dripping down the crevices of his body as he wiped his forehead with his forearm.

Something wasn't right.

Silvanus took a step forward, dragging his eyes down the marble body. He circled the statue, inspecting every inch in search of accidental dents or misplaced grooves. He found nothing, but the intuition stayed. Returning to his spot in front of the stone, staring up into the face of the woman he had formed by hand. Suddenly, it hit him with the force of a bull.

Aphrodite.

The statue had the same face as her. The body was curved and bare, except for a thin veil of stone draped over her shoulders. The eyes; big and full like the moon, with thick eyebrows overhead. The nose was small and round, with a bump in the middle, just like hers. The lips were plump, curved into a familiar smirk and shaped like a heart. The marble hair curled into waves cascading down her back, strands framing her round face.

It was her. He had sculpted her. That wretched liar, dishonest and malevolent. She had played with his heart, had torn it out of his chest and crushed it between her fingers. She had left him and never even glanced back. He recalled how she had claimed to be the goddess she was named after; the Goddess of Love and Beauty. Beauty, yes - nobody could deny that. But love? No, no, no. She was evil; a witch, a succubus, a demon sent to torment him.

Silvanus acted in an act of pure rage and hatred as he shoved the statue off its pedestal. It crashed against the floor, scattering into millions of pieces. He panted and heaved, his vision blurry with anger. He wanted to wipe every memory of her from his mind. He wanted to erase her existence, like he had all those years ago. Silvanus didn't understand how she had snuck back into his mind like that of a serpent.

The next time Silvanus sculpted, almost a month later, he cleared his mind of her. He focused only on the task at hand, eating away at the block of stone with his tools. But yet, he did it again. Silvanus had carved her for the second time, his lost love Aphrodite. He smashed it with a mallet within thirty seconds of realizing what he had created.

Over and over, for days on end, Silvanus would sculpt. Every single time, he would create her cursed form. He destroyed them in plenty of creative ways, but once reaching the tenth statue of Aphrodite, he gave up. He stashed them away in the corner of his workroom, attempting to ignore them as he brought in the next block and the next, adding to his collection with every slab of stone pierced. Nevertheless, Silvanus continued, wasting his wealth on the chunks of marble, attempting to cure himself of his obsession. He wanted to prove that he was capable of sculpting anything other than her, yet only furthered the cycle with his actions.

The process slowly drove him to madness; Silvanus was deeply convinced he was cursed by his old flame, Aphrodite. If she had been what she had claimed to be, the Greek Goddess occupying Olympus, she would surely have the power. After he had destroyed the first statue, perhaps she had grown angry. Aphrodite could have brought down her own rage upon him, cursing him with this obsession.

Silvanus was sure of his theory, as he looked upon the hundreds of stone faces. The light of the moon shone upon the room through the large window, illuminating the sculptures of Aphrodite and the man in front of them. His hands were ripped and torn, bleeding and scuffed due to the countless amount of times he had cut away at stone. His body was covered in the dust from the chiseled marble, his dark hair matted with white. Silvanus was exhausted and his body ached. He needed rest, but more than anything, he needed to prove to himself he was still the famous sculptor known throughout Greece for his breathtaking works. He forced himself to stand, turning away from the rows of sculptures portraying his old love in various different positions, and turned back to his work in progress.

Silvanus grasped his tools in hands, carving away as his hands bled onto the marble, but he didn't stop. He didn't stop when the sun came up, nor when the moon returned to its glory. He didn't sleep, nor did he eat or drink. Eventually, exhaustion and dehydration took their hold upon the young sculptor. Silvanus finished his last masterpiece, stained blood red, and let out a cry of triumph. He stumbled back, before crashing down, his eyes closing before he even hit the floor. But, he had beaten her curse. He had beaten her.

Silvanus had banished everyone from his workroom: the only time someone was allowed near was to set his food outside the door. The first few days, the servants would serve it at the entrance and retrieve when it went unnoticed. This wasn't uncommon during those last few months, but once the plates piled up and the man hadn't been seen for days on end, a servant had been sent to check on him. The young woman was hesitant, fearing his wrath of being interrupted, yet pushed on. The door creaked open, and the sight was revealed to the heavens. There, on the floor, was the famous sculptor, Silvanus. His arms were covered in his own blood, and his corpse had begun to rot. Surrounding the room were his dreaded statues of Aphrodite, rows upon rows, all looking down at the carcass of their creator. On the pedestal above him was his last masterpiece, his final work. It towered over even the largest sculptures of the woman. A figure of a man stained red, carved to perfection, so real it looked as if it would step off its post. The statue of Silvanus stood tall.

Carter Lee

Age: 14, Grade: 8

School Name: Sabot at Stony Point, Richmond, VA

Educator: Sarah Lile

Category: Poetry

Carter's Delightful Poems

I do not believe it when people say, that finding a four leaf clover will give you luck within the day.
Although, they are a rare find, I have found enough to say that they don't provide much luck as people say they do.

Why do I say this? Well, in my spare time, I've found about 767 four leaf clovers up to today.
However, a fraction of the clovers I've found have provided me luck.
But the other clovers from the ground, not the sky, were not very lucky.

You are probably wondering, "Do five leaf clovers exist?" the answer is yes, they do.
Throughout my life, I have persisted, to find at least 100 five leaf clovers, I have not resisted.
Though, up to today, I am only at 66, which is more than halfway,
Something else that you should know is that only 2% of the five leaf clovers
I have found from the ground were lucky, leaving the rest to be unlucky.

Another question you might ask is "Are there any six leaf clovers out there?" yes, there are.
Though I have only found 4 six leaf clovers,
They do not suck, they provide a lot more luck than a regular four leaf clover could.

I know what's coming, what you are going to ask, "Have I ever found a seven leaf clover?" no, I have not.
Though, I shall never stop searching for seven leaf clovers until I find one.
Until then, I am not done searching for those clovers, one by one.

I have a goal, a goal to find around 1000 four leaf clovers before I go off to high school.
I only have about six months left until that due date, and I have confidence in myself
That I will be able to achieve this goal in a matter of time.

That is all I have to say about four, five, six, and seven leaf clovers.
Although, if you want to know, then here you go:
I have not found any clovers with eight or more leaves.
However, on my quest to find a seven leaf clover, I also want to find clovers with eight, nine and ten leaves, too.
Otherwise, I am done here. Thank you.

Pi is such a wonderful number, 3.14159,
So many digits, so divine!

Relating to circles, a shape without corners, a two-dimensional object with no borders.
In order to find the area of a circle, you must first find not a semicircle, but the radius.
Or, you can find the diameter, which is only the radius, not a millimeter, but multiplied by two.
Once you find the radius, just do pi times the radius squared.

3.14159, those are only the first digits of pi,
2653589, 7 more digits of pi, oh my!

7932384, so many numbers wait there's more?
6264338, of course, there is since there is no wait.

3279502, it's like a song, do-be-do-be-do,
8841971, please don't leave, I'm not done!

6939937, seven-eleven,
5105820 that's all I know.
Though, there are still trillions among trillions of digits of pi, oh my!

However, even though this number goes on forever, I just have to say that up to this day,
That there is no one in this world who could memorize all of the digits of pi.
But if you try, it is still possible for you and I to memorize the first several of the digits of pi, oh my!

Minecraft is a pretty fun game, and I think you should try it.
Don't believe me? Since it is not lame, then don't mind me explaining all of the many past, present and future
Changes this game has gone through and changes yet to be made.

Minecraft was born on May 10, 2009.
At first it was known as The Cave Game.
There was only cobble and grass.
Six days later was the Early Classic update.
Trees and ores were the biggest features,
Although, there still weren't any creatures.

Can't build your dream home?
Then this update you'll like:
Multiplayer Test is the name of this change,
What is new? Well let me tell you:
Within the range from flowers, glass, and wool, but no tools.
These were the biggest features here,
However, the ability of playing with more than one player was available, too.

Eventually was the Survival Test update.
Most importantly, this update brought creepers to us.
What is a creeper? I can tell you:
The creeper was supposed to be a pig,
However, one of the developers accidentally flipped the body vertical.
This gave them the idea to add in the creeper.
And by the way, creepers blow up, too.

The Indev update is next on the list,
Get ready for Crafting tables, chests, tools, torches, fire, apples, diamonds
And survival mode, kind of like a twist.
Survival mode is really fun,
Since you have collect resources and fight off hostile mobs.

Now let's go from 2009 to 2014
By now, they have the Nether, the End, redstone, enchanting, jungles,
Golems, trading, horses, anvils, the wither boss, and way more fun!

1.7 and 1.8, were the updates
That changed the world.
11 new biomes plus new world generation.
Along with ocean monuments and their
Deadly, underwater guardians.

Going from 2014 to 2017

Past End cities, elytra, woodland mansions, polar bears and magma blocks, too!

Now we are heading towards 1.12: The World of Color update.

So many new colors of blocks, coming with parrots that dance to music!

Now here we are in 2018, with 1.13, the Aquatic update,

This was when fish and dolphins, coral reefs and turtles, too,

Were all added into the game.

Next is 1.14, the Village and Pillage update,

Welcoming raids, pandas, foxes, bamboo, pillagers, village overhaul,

and so many new textures!

1.15, that was pretty small, Buzzy Bees is what it is called.

They added bees, beehives, nectar, honey, and bee nests, too.

Sounds pretty funny.

The most recent update Minecraft has had

Was the Nether update.

This update changed the Nether forever with 4 new Nether biomes, Netherite gear, plus a couple mobs.

The Nether is like the underworld, full of fear and pools of lava.

Up to today, there still a lot more to be added

Though, at this moment, Mojang is creating 1.17, The Caves and Cliffs update.

There are bound to be many new features,

Such as bigger caves, copper ore, archeology, axolotls, wardens, and goats that live on massive mountains.

This update will be released in the Summer of 2021. Now I am done.

Colors, so many colors.

Shades from light to dark, primary and complementary colors,

Oh, what fun will it be learning all of the colors of the rainbow!

Red. Red is the color of many fruits,

Reading stop, not go,

Red is the color of blood, and it could often lead to your final breath.

Orange. Oranges are orange

Obviously.

Over a span of many centuries, orange has not rhyme with anything.

Yellow. You know that the sun is yellow.

You might know that bananas are, too.

Yes, yellow is bright, yet it does not have many favorites.

Green. Green apple

Green lime

Go, not stop, in a great big world.

Blue. Big, blue sky.

Bodies of water.

But the color blue has many favorites.

Purple. Pretty, precious purple

Purple is special in many ways from being

Pretty expensive back then, to being a pretty royal color.

There you have it. The colors of the rainbow.
Though you may say that I forgot about Indigo and Violet,
Though if you want me to go on, that I can do.

Indigo.
It's not purple, it's not blue,
It's Indigo! It has a pretty cool ocean hue.

Violet. Vibrant Violet
Violet always bringing those good
Vibes, oh what fun. Very vigorous violet.

There.
Now I must say that
Now by including those two colors, I
Notice that if I were to look at a rainbow, I would like to try and see all of those colors.

Among us. 12 different colors. Each with their own definition. That's what this is all about.

Red is the one who
Is always suspected first.
I do not know why.

Orange is the one
Who nobody talks about.
That is pretty strange.

Yellow is the one
Who will often change his mind.
Cannot decide, huh?

Lime is the one who
Constantly blames everyone
Except for himself.

Green is the one who
Gets voted out for really
No exact reason.

Cyan is always
Called out for being really
Suspicious often.

Blue is the one who
Nobody believes at all.
Give him a chance, guys!

Purple is the one
Who has all of the bad lies.
You can do better!

Pink is the one who
Cannot stand being alone.
Spooky scary imposters.

Black is the one who
Is often known as the best
Detective, oh yes.

White is the one who
Everyone seems to believe
For not a reason.

Last, but not least, is
Brown, who is the one that gives
False information.

These are each of the definitions of each of
The colors in the game called Among Us.

Malena Lo Prete

Age: 17, Grade: 11

Home School, Midlothian , VA

Educator: Jennifer Lo Prete

Category: Poetry

Daughter for Dinner Date

Daughter for Dinner Date

I am a mashed potatoes girl.
A soft girl,
No edges.
All sad,
Watery,
Soft, blurred lines.
Melted birthday cake ice cream on a hot sidewalk.
I am a woman
Lying facedown on the asphalt.
Boneless,
Waiting for the sun
To fry me like a greasy, buttery chicken.
I am a pile of dirt
Compared to the mountain I should be.
I am an overcooked, puffy, bloated,
Girl.
Left on the bottom of the bowl,
Drowning in
Creamy ricotta tomato sauce.
I am a small fish
Boiling in a puddle of extra virgin olive oil
Hiding on my grilled zucchini.
I am the rotten, moldy,
Husked peel,
Of the orange I said I had with breakfast.
I am sorry
To the kitchen and to the fridge.
I plead forgiveness to the left over,
Uneaten, hand cooked meals,
Served to me with a side of worry
As I pray to the gospel of
Calorie counting apps and health guides
Posted innocuously on Instagram.
Articles on the perfect BMI
Lay before me like a trail of crumbs
From my favorite cookie.
Numbers and calculations hover over me
At family lunch,
While I hover in the glances exchanged between my parents.
I am sorry for every birthday dinner and holiday meal
Burnt by my own cold hands.

There is no way to scoop my dinner out of the garbage,
And no way for me
To stop being eaten alive
By my own fork and knife.

Nicole McCormick

Age: 17, Grade: 12

School Name: St Catherine's School, Richmond, VA

Educator: John Morgan

Category: Personal Essay & Memoir

My Invisible Twin

I am a twin. We share close to 50% of our DNA. However, unlike most twins, my brother Matthew and I are total opposites. He has an intellectual disability, and I do not. This difference hasn't always been easy for either of us. When we were little kids, Matthew and I did almost everything together: We played on the same soccer teams, basketball teams, and even tried T-ball one spring. We both attended Second Baptist Preschool and Twin Hickory Elementary School. My mom bought us coordinating outfits from Jack and Jill, and we always had joint birthday parties at Pump it Up (separate cakes, of course – I wanted a High School Musical theme, he preferred Kung Fu Panda). As we got older, however, I began to notice more of the things that made us different. He still seemed like a little kid as I matured. As a result, we grew apart. At first, I remember thinking *maybe this year he'll stop acting that way*. But nothing changed. All through elementary and middle school, I wondered if he would ever catch up. He embarrassed me at times when he didn't comprehend basic social cues. Why were we so unlike?

While I excelled in school and was a social butterfly, my brother struggled with understanding basic concepts despite the help of teacher aids. He faced trouble with being accepted; some found him weird and unlike them. Going to different schools and pursuing separate interests turned being a twin from a distinct part of my identity to just an easy fun fact to share during icebreakers. As I became involved in numerous disciplines across my school, including sports teams, clubs, and other social aspects, Matthew didn't quite have a "thing." In his free time, he enjoyed watching any movie that came to theaters, from *Deadpool* to *Trolls* to his least favorite, *The Odd Life of Timothy Green*. I often struggled that I didn't have a "normal" relationship with my sibling like my friends.

Growing up with not just a sibling, but a twin, that has special needs has allowed me to understand more of a perspective of someone who often feels like an outsider. My relationship with Matthew has enabled me to develop more patience and empathy; it sometimes takes a great deal of effort just to get him to engage in a simple conversation. As we have gotten older, the distance between us has narrowed. There have been little moments that have made us genuine and complete. I'll always cherish the spontaneous drives to Cookout, our favorite restaurant, or occasional walks together around our neighborhood. I have learned from him that sometimes emotions and gratitude don't need to be said outright but shown through the simplest gestures. Even small things like sitting in the family room and watching *The Office* have bonded us and grown our relationship. I think being total opposites has, in a way, made it both harder and easier to understand each other. There are still many qualities of myself that I see in him. We are both quick on our feet, stubborn (I blame my dad for inheriting that quality), and keenly observant. His lack of "book smarts" is replaced by his amazing memory, something I've always envied. While he may not be able to ace a test or properly hold a serious conversation, he can still recall the exact date we hugged that goldendoodle in 2011 and make me cry from laughing over a solid joke at dinner.

Matthew and I are twins. We share 50% of our DNA. Still, it is our differences that have shown me parts of myself that I didn't even know were there.

Jumana Meri

Age: 17, Grade: 12

School Name: Appomattox Regional Governor's School, Chesterfield, VA

Educators: Jumana Meri, Patty Smith

Category: Personal Essay & Memoir

Muslim of the Year

I knew they were going to pronounce my name wrong. My black pumps clacked up the stairs as I made my way to the shiny hardwood floors of the school auditorium. My award dangled from the Superintendent's hand. I looked at the glistening golden plaque engraved with my name, and the words "Student of the Year 2017." I don't know what beamed more, my face, or the blinding stage light. I tried to locate my mother in the audience, but everyone was blurring together except for one image. My hands grew clammy, and my hold on the plaque loosened. I became aware of the sweat that sprinkled my forehead as I gazed into the blue eyes of the man wearing a red "Make America Great Again" hat.

The night of November 3rd came faster than a blink of an eye. My heart beat as the CNN host tallied the electoral votes per state. A *bismillah* rolled off my mother's tongue as the nominee was announced. All the colors on my TV merged together, except the name, Donald Trump. My parents looked at each other in disbelief. They knew that the next four years would bring them hardship as Palestinian, and Muslim Americans. Tears formed as I regretted staying up to watch this horror show. My heart jumped as I realized that a person who doesn't care about my rights was just handed the most powerful seat in the world.

The next morning at school, the words "Trump, President, can't believe, shocked," filled the hallway. I knew what the hot topic was for today. As I walked into class, one of my peers, Jacob, started to chant, "Make America Great Again," and gave me a pointed look. He wanted my attention. I made my way to his desk and said "He's not going to make America great again - he's just going to divide our nation!" Jacob smirked and whispered to me, "Jumana, you're going to be fine."

On January 27th, the Executive order 13769 was passed. Trump legislated a travel ban from seven majority Muslim countries from entering the United States. My family and I felt like we didn't belong here. It was a tough time. My mom was scared to leave her house with her hijab on because she feared that something bad might happen.

Two months later in English class, I was assigned an essay called, "The Letter For Change." The assignment was to write a letter to a leader on an issue that I felt passionate about. I decided to write about the Muslim Ban, and the spread of Islamophobia in America. Everytime I read my letter, I could see my Muslim family between the blue lines of the paper. I felt proud knowing that I raised my voice for the millions of Muslim people who have been ignored. Little did I know, the letter for change would be a factor in receiving Student of the year.

As I walked down the steps, my black heels clacked harder as I stelled on top of the world. My parents were waiting for me near the front of the auditorium. Joyful tears ran down my mother's face. I glanced down at my golden plaque. It was a reminder to never forget where I came from. It showed me that I'm capable of raising my voice, even in a crowd that was silent. I'm proud to call myself a Muslim, even in Trump's America. *Alhamdulillah*.

Mary Moe

Age: 13, Grade: 8

School Name: Binford Middle School, Richmond, VA

Educator: Kirstie Hein Sadler

Category: Short Story

The Mind Reader in Math Class

"Four hundred seventy-seven, four hundred seventy-eight, four hundred seventy-nine. Four hundred seventy-nine little spots on the ceiling!" I think. I glance at the clock and my lips curl into a frown. Thirty more minutes of class. Thirty more minutes of doing nothing. Thirty more minutes of complete silence and complete boredom. Math used to be my favorite class, the keyword "used to." Then my teacher moved across the country. No one wants to teach a group of rowdy ninth-graders for the last half of the year, so we've had a new substitute every week. This one, Mrs. Wiggins, has been my least favorite.

I notice that the weird kid across the room from me, Luke, gives me a look that says he feels the same. "That's weird," I think to myself.

The quiet pitter-patter sound of rain hitting the big glass windows and the dark gray rain clouds have made this class even more sad and gloomy than usual. But hey, I have learned some very useful things in class this past week. I learned how many chairs have uneven legs, how many faint lines are in the wood grain on my desk, and how many little spots are on the ceiling.

I steal a glance at my friend Anna from across the room. Her head is on her desk and white light is reflected onto her face. She's sneaking on her phone, like usual. I pull out my phone and text her, "look up." Her head snaps up and she looks at me, putting her phone back in her pocket.

"I think someone's reading my mind," she mouths to me.

I give her a confused look.

"Every time I think something funny, that kid Luke laughs. And when I think something gross, he looks disgusted.

And whenever the answer finally comes to mind, he gives me a thumbs-up," she mouths, enunciating each word over dramatically so I'll understand.

I frown, "that's creepy."

That night, I can't stop thinking about mind-reading. It can't be a coincidence that he always reacts appropriately to whatever she thinks. It's weird and pretty creepy. I fall asleep thinking of ways to get him to confess.

The next day at school, I see Anna in the hallway. I motion for her to come to me so I can tell her my perfect plan to get him to spill the beans.

"First, I'm going to scream super loud inside my head. If he flinches or reacts at all, then we know that something fishy is happening. Then we will both think things like, 'you have something in your hair' or 'your shoes are untied' and see how he reacts. Then we swoop in on him after class, got it?" I explain.

Anna nods. "Got it."

At 2:45, we step foot into the worst class of the day. The only thing making this class good today is the fact that we're about to make a huge discovery. We start class normally, shuffling to our seats and setting down our bags. I lean back to rest my head on the back of the seat and stare at the bare gray walls of the classroom. The room is completely silent except for the *tick, tick, tick* of the clock, and the snoring of Mrs. Wiggins at her desk. Right when the clock hits 3:00, I execute my plan.

I let out a blood-curdling scream. Except, it's in my head.

And right when I do it, Luke almost jumps out of his seat. I look at Anna, my eyes wide.

"Did he flinch?" She mouths.

I nod, my eyes still bulging.

For the next part of our plan, we have to wait a few minutes. I pretend that I'm writing on the desk so I won't seem suspicious. When the clock hits 3:04 I start to flood Luke's head with things like, "Your shoes are untied" or

"There's stuff in your hair." He immediately reacts, his head snapping up when he realizes that he gave himself away. He stares directly at me and then looks to his left at Anna. I stare at him back, just to let him know that I caught him in the act and I know his secret. Anna and I glance at each other, wondering what we're going to say to him about

his creepy mind-reading. And we only have 15 minutes to figure it out.

After class, we meet at the bathroom to discuss what we are going to say to him.

"That's SO creepy!" She exclaims.

"I know!" I reply.

"But what are we supposed to say to him? 'Hey, I thought you were a mind reader so I told you a bunch of stuff in my head so you would freak out and accidentally give it away.'" Anna says.

"How about not that?" I say. "We just need to ask him something like, 'hey why do you always react to whatever I think?'"

Anna shrugs, "I guess that's good enough."

After school, we go into the back parking lot to question Luke.

"Hey, Luke, do you have a second?" I ask.

"Depends, why?" He answers.

"How do we say this... are you a mind reader?" Anna asks abruptly.

"That's not what we agreed on," I whisper.

She shrugs.

Luke backs away. "Uh, I gotta go," he says.

"No, come back. We're not going to tell anyone," I say.

"But I'm NOT a mind reader," he declares.

"Are you sure? What am I thinking right now?" Anna asks.

"That I'm lying and I am a mind reader," Luke mutters.

"See! You are!" She turns to me. "He is!"

"I'm not!" He yells.

"Yes, you are! Just admit it!" Anna exclaims.

"No. I'm not. I don't know why you think I am." Luke storms off to the bus.

"I know he is," I say.

He whips around while he's on the bus steps and yells, "and NO anna, I am not going to admit to it! Because I'm not!"

"Were you thinking that?" I ask her.

"Yep," She smiles.

Nadia Moore

Age: 15, Grade: 10

School Name: Henrico High School Center for the Arts, Richmond, VA

Educator: LaShaunda Craddock

Category: Poetry

Can My Loneliness Sit with Yours?

01.

i am a lonely girl
i haven't felt the warmth
of a body next to mine
in winter

i haven't spent a spring
holding a hand
while smelling all
the blooming flowers

every summer has passed
with my bare feet alone
on the burning concrete
i race myself to autumn

i am a lonely girl
with sweaters for warmth,
gloves for hands,
and substitutions for intimacy

maybe this fall
when the leaves cover the ground
i'll hear the crunch of footsteps
beside me

02.

my insincerities have
destroyed my substance,
leaving only
a facade behind

i have a thousand faces,
but my eyes remain
empty. my words stay
scripted.

playing the agreeable part
has erased my truthful volume;
air and expensive fragrance
fill that vacuumed void.

but even after

ripping myself apart,
and offering
the appealing pieces;

i find myself alone.
i guess i should have realized
i can't be a part of something
when i am nothing by myself.

03.

waking up to
silence, the alarm
you set for yourself
is your one steady companion.

you exit your place
of resting and
your ocean-covered pillow wonders
how you stopped yourself
from drowning.

are you still,
dreading being stuck
in a 24 hour loop?

have you decided to break
into the future or the past?

do you ask the empty
space beside you how
the day had gone,
and wait
for the wind to answer?

at your semblance of night,
when your tired pillow catches
your last emotions before sleep,
do you still want to wake up in the morning?

Clare Mullins

Age: 13, Grade: 8

School Name: Holman Middle School, Glen Allen, VA

Educator: Abbey Warren

Category: Short Story

Dancing to Detonation

DANCING TO DETONATION

By Clare Mullins

Spectacularly, the Maack sisters always manage to blend into crowds, despite Esther's prosthetic leg being a light-up fish tank and Piper's concerning amount of knives. Perhaps it's dumb luck, but then again, perhaps it's their marvelous disguises. The Maack sisters are ruthless, waltzing into a party with polite smiles and leaving with every expensive item in a sack, covered in smoke and gunpowder but grinning wolfishly. Both of their faces are plastered across the streets of every planet in every galaxy, but they have managed to evade The Enforcers for seven, going on eight years. Tonight's heist was no different; in and out. Technically, there were more steps than that. Create fake personas, forge ID cards and invitations to a fancy party, learn the floor plans of the buildings, plant the bombs, enter the party, dance, flirt and drink wine, make conversation, lure the party-goers into a false sense of security. Then, when the party was at its peak, *BOOM!* The windows would shatter and half of the building would collapse.

People would scream and flee the scene, leaving Esther and Piper to split up, grab everything in sight, and rendezvous back at their ship.

December 19th, 5012, the night of the heist. It was supposed to be like any other job; simple, fun. But sometimes life doesn't work out as it should. The Maack sister are getting dressed in their ship. It's a quaint little thing, with a pastel paint job and stocked with comfy pillows. They had stolen it from a rich merchant's daughter. Esther is tying the ribbons on her corset, and she grabs her tall, leather black boots once she's done. She slips it over her prosthetic leg. The miniature, life-like koi fish droids inside of the fishtank-leg power down as the boot blocks any outside light. She has grown fond of the prosthetic, but Esther knew it was too recognizable. As she began to curl her hair, the memory of how she first received her prosthetic rises to the surface of her mind.

The Maack sister's first robbery was a disaster. It was long and complicated, and Esther had her leg completely shattered by an Enforcer, his rubbery weapon swinging wildly. The two sisters had managed to crawl away and blackmail a doctor into performing a hasty amputation. The loss of her leg had left Esther unable to walk without a crutch, and criminals needed to be fast. So Esther had gathered all of their little earnings and told Piper to go buy her a prosthetic leg. Esther, never one to be flashy, told Piper to purchase a simple, humble prosthetic. When Piper came home parading an extravagant, fish-tank leg that was so expensive they landed the two in debt, Esther nearly exploded from rage. She recalled calling it an "ornamental." How was she to run in glass, after all? However, as the years passed, Esther begrudgingly admitted that the leg was a good investment. She had discovered that it was made with ultra-rare living glass. Living glass bent like flesh and was completely bulletproof. Esther yelps as she burns her pinky with the hair ironer. The sudden pain reels her mind back into the present.

There's a metallic *shhwwsh* as the door opens behind Esther. Piper stands in the doorway, draped in a creamy dress with puffy white bows. Her dark hair is done up in a loose chignon, with white ribbons wrapped around the bun like a border of chalk. Her posture looks uncomfortably straight; her head always slightly tipped backward. She sashays up next to Esther's oak vanity and grabs her chin with her petite hands.

"Hmm. You need more blush." She declares squeakily.

"I have enough," Esther replies, shuddering at the thought of putting even more powdery blush on herself. Esther detested makeup since she was a little girl. "In fact, I have *gobs* of blush on, can't you tell?"

Piper squints up at her sister with her small, round eyes. "Not really. You're just very pasty," She answers, pulling out more blush from a drawer in the vanity.

"You need to think before you speak, young lady!" Esther snaps.

“Well, *you* need to have some time out in the sun *young lady!*” Piper mocks. “I don’t think the rich fellows at the party will be very interested in dancing with you with that bossy attitude! Especially if your skin is so pale that it would put *ghosts* to shame!” Piper, despite being eighteen, sticks her tongue out at her older sister.

“Why you-! Get back here!” Esther exclaims as Piper scampers out of the room. Esther lets out a defeated sigh. *Grow up, Piper. Sometimes I think she forgets that this is a* ~~deist~~ *and not a family outing.* Esther feels a chill go down her spine. *Our last family outing didn’t go very well...* Esther brushes the thought away. A subtle smile creeps onto her face. Esther has to admit that it’s a comical sight to see Piper at the ball, surrounded by a flock of rich young men. *Beep.* The small watch on her wrist flashed as it reached Ten O’Clock. Esther exits her room and approaches Piper, who is hunched over a map of the mansion. Esther grabs Piper by the elbow. “Hurry, we’re going to be late!” She says, dragging her sister out of the ship. Their heels clack against the metallic floors of the landing zone. Ahead of them is the target mansion, perched upon a hill. Well-dressed men and women titter and gossip as they glide through the path to the mansion. Esther and Piper straighten and unfurl their fans. They take each other’s elbows and begin to elegantly meander towards the mansion, laughing obnoxiously at jokes poking fun of the poor. By the time they make it to the elegant, swooping doors of the mansion, Piper feels overcome with fury. *I bet I could strangle those nobles with their own fancy clothes!* Her face turns scarlet in anger, but eight years of espionage and acting keeps her face perfect and amused like a porcelain doll. A man dressed in dark clothing checks the guests’ IDs before allowing them to enter. The sisters approach with a polite curtsy and girlish giggles. “Here, kind sir,” Esther hands two fake IDs to the man.

Lucy Byrne
Darcie Byrne

The man stares down at them, an eyebrow raised. “Your names are not on the guest list.” He grumbles. Esther does not need to fake the gasp of surprise that escaped her lips. *I didn’t account for a guest list.* She looks around frantically. Piper improvises. She pouts her lips and places her hands on her hips. She waggles a finger sternly up at the man. “This better be a nasty trick, mister!” Piper stands on her tippy toes as she continues to frown up at the man. “Mr. Hygrad is not going to be happy if *someone* drops the ball and doesn’t let his *dear cousins* into his very own party!” She snaps indignantly. Esther recovers from her stupor. “E-Er, yes, we would make sure to report to dearest Parker that his bouncer would be so rude!” The man’s mouth twitches. “You’re Master Hygrad’s cousins?” He asks, shifting uncomfortably. “Yes, we *are!* See, we can even have him come out and tell you! OOOHH PAAARKERR-” The bouncer claps his hand over Piper’s mouth. “Shh! Okay, okay!” The man gives back their IDs and ushers them inside.

The sisters smile at each other. They’re in.

Pooja Muthuraj

Age: 15, Grade: 10

School Name: Maggie L Walker Governor's School, Richmond, VA

Educator: John Piersol

Category: Poetry

Nothing: A Violin and Cello Arrangement

My vocal cords are strung like those
Of a violin terrified to break,
Stretched so taught across my neck that
They refuse to vibrate
Until you go—I wonder if you know, considering

Your voice is the same, although it is cello
And I know, this despite
Having never actually heard its mellow moan—
I know, this despite
Our father and daughter selves having never exchanged a “hello”

I guess that when I enter the room, you already know, but
You know, the worst part
The worst part is when I can't talk to you
Because I can't know how you'll respond
But the *worse* part
The *worse* part is when you can't respond
Because there is nothing to respond to

Except, of course,
The unwritten notes

The unwritten notes that tremble between us
Gingerly balanced on withheld breaths
As we stare point-blank at a blanker composition
Considering infinite conversations
That could fill the rests between our hands and the stanzas
We cannot risk playing

Of course,
The infinite problem with infinite conversations
Is that they have no end
And that they have no beginning
And that infinities aren't real

And that infinities aren't real,
So we settle on silence,
Which is real, and orchestrated really well
To leave ample room for every flattened chord, every worst case

So that you only enter the room
When my violin is in its case,

And trapped as well as a bird set against a cloudless sky with its wings paralyzed
Compromised

We compromise, leaving ample silence for communication
So that your cello strings only sing out of my earshot, just in case

Still strings don't vibrate
But we do play, still
We just play safe

Because this could either be everything or heartbreaking
We arrange to leave it at nothing

Kayleann Myrthil

Age: 16, Grade: 11

School Name: Glen Allen High School, Glen Allen, VA

Educator: Lindsay Steele

Category: Personal Essay & Memoir

You Have Muted Me

You have muted me.

Your prideful head says you are always right,
I get that trait from you.
We bump heads like buffalo,
You say I'm wrong. I say only partially.
I am wrong in the sense I can not say all the words I please,
With the imaginary gag, you have placed in my mouth,
You have muted me.

I am unknowing to all the burdens I have given you,
But I am not unknowing to burden.
You are unknowing to all the loathing I hold for you,
Yes, you are unknowing, soaring above it like a bird,
Only coming down to critique my every action.
You say you brought me here, you could take me out,
Are these sneering words supposed to make me feel grateful?

You ridicule without remorse,
But I can not say anything, you have muted me.
Your praise is petty, few and far in between,
But I can not say anything, my thoughts of you are changing,
You jab me with words that feel like spears,
But I can not say anything, and rage wells inside.

I will not hold it any longer,
Like a dam, I will burst,
Your face I can not say it to, less it flood with tears.
My rage takes over
Like a wildfire, it burns.
But your heart, it will not touch, less it burns all the way through.
I still love you, but loathing comes close second,
I will make it as transparent as glass,
You have muted me, so to other methods, I shall resort.

A muted storm I can not contain,
A well of emotion overflowing.
Like a ball of tangled vines,
My words are jumbled together.
And my heart
My heart,
Red, swelled and broken,
My guardian, the center of my muted hurricane.

Returning to my roots with no machete to breakthrough,
Like a cocoon you surrounded me,
Suffocating inside,
Conflicting feelings, a thin barrier in my mind,
You have muted me, so to writing, I shall resort,
No longer will I remain silent,
I will scream in the form of a poem.

These words I hope you see,
Only a fraction of my fractured, glassy, red heart,
Only a portion of my grief, that you soar above with wings you do not share.
Grovel on the ground I may,
But I will not grovel at your feet.
I refuse to be silent,
On the exterior indifferent to your treatment.

Of me, myself, and I,
I will turn inside out, like a wrongly folded shirt.
I will selfishly blame you for all the problems in my life,
It will hurt me more than it hurts you,
Is what you always preach.
You say we will never be equal,
But that does not mean I must remain beneath the ground you lay.
I will break from the ground like a zombie,
Like a phoenix, I will scorch, rise, and fly.

You have taught me things
great and small,
good and bad.
Like the child I am,
I soak it up like a sponge.
From the putrid smell of dislocated promises,
To all the things you have pushed on to me.
Muted I shall no longer be, and my reflection shall never be you.

Layla Patel

Age: 13, Grade: 8

School Name: St Catherine's School, Richmond, VA

Educator: Julie Elmore

Category: Short Story

The Jones Children and the Red Chair

The Jones Children and the Red Chair

On New Years Eve in Chicago, Illinois, the Jones Family waited with suspense for the ball to drop and the fresh new year of 3000 to start. Everyone in the city was not as excited as usual. It was almost like starting the new year was a burden on the people's shoulders. The Jones family felt especially gloomy because it was the exact day last year that their grandmother had passed. The family sat in silence with the fire burning and hot chocolate on the stove in their large yet simple, modern home. Outside the air was crisp, the wind was cold, and the grass was covered with milk white snow. This year everyone in the nation saw the ball drop on TV instead of in person; no one wanted to stand outside in the cold. The Jones Family lethargically counted down the seconds until the ball would drop... 3... the lights started to flicker frantically... 2... 1...the lights went out. The family was left in the darkness with no TV or lights. Jesse, the teenage daughter, shrieked, filled with horror as the lights went out.

The mother, Martha, yelled, "Calm down, it's fine. Just a weird coincidence. Find the flashlights and candles."

The family groped through the darkness struggling to find a source of light. Before they could find flashlights or candles the lights turned on abruptly. With their eyes blinded by the bright white lights they proceeded with their normal activities as if nothing had happened. Alex shouted "Happy New Year", and the family chuckled and went to bed.

The next day, like usual, Martha and her husband, Frank, left to get groceries before the sun set onto the snowy mountains. Jesse and Alex continued to scroll on their phones aimlessly. Minutes after their parents left Jesse heard quiet tapping on the ceiling.

She asked her oblivious younger brother, "Did you hear that?"

He took off his large headphones and said, "No."

A few minutes went by and Jesse heard the same tapping except a bit louder. She looked around the living room trying to figure out where the sound might be coming from.

Then her brother cried, "Wait! I hear the sound!"

Suddenly they heard an elderly voice coming from the ceiling, it was loud and clear.

The voice said, "Hello my grandchildren, I have missed you!"

The children wailed with fear and Alex had large tears forming in his eyes.

Jesse says, "Hello?! Who is there?"

The voice responds, "It is me, Grandma Isabel! Don't be frightened I am here to tell you something important."

They said, "What is it?"

"I am here to tell you that this new year will be dreadful. There will be bombs, riots, and pandemics, you need to escape! I don't want you all to get hurt. I want you to be with me as soon as possible. I am currently in a place called The Hiding, it is a beautiful island in the sky with many other fellows like me who have died on Earth and came to The Hiding. I created it soon after I passed. I am lonely in a place called The Hiding where you all can avoid this terrible year that is about to happen, but it needs to be top secret because I want you to both to return back to Earth when the year is over."

The children started to get afraid. This information hit them like a ton of bricks. They were confused at why this was happening and why their grandmother wanted them.

Their grandmother said, "Go to the attic and read the note I have left"

Jesse and Alex were shaken as they obediently went to the attic. They have not been to their dark attic in years. You could see the fear in their eyes as they trembled up each step.

The small attic had a peculiar smell, almost like there has been wet wood and paint rotting for months. The children had appalled looks as they smell the fumes of the attic. They start to cough from the atrocious smell. The only thing in the room was a throne-looking, radiant, red chair.

After Alex took his last cough he whispered, "Have we always had that thing?"

Jesse shrugs.

She says, "C'mon we have to find that note Grandma Isabel was talking about!"

They find the small note directly in front of the chair.

Suddenly, the green attic door shuts with an intense echo and the small note drops from Jesse's sweaty hands.

Jesse and Alex fall hard to the ground as they run with intensity and fear. While the children screamed for help there was a force pulling them towards the red throne chair.

Jesse and Alex's hands started slipping from one another's as Alex yelled, "No! Jesse!"

Jesse's arm and Alex's back hit the chair with a hard bang. All of a sudden they were gone. Nowhere to be seen. They disappeared from the world. They were now on their way into The Hiding to be with their grandmother. They had no choice.

About forty minutes later Martha and Frank returned expecting to see their children on their electronics in their rooms.

They came in with groceries and Martha yelled, "Kids! Get off your electronics and come help with the groceries!"

After a few seconds, Martha does not hear any voices, so she yelled again, "Kids! C'mon get down here!"

Minutes passed by and the couple did not hear anything, so Martha went upstairs into their rooms, but there was nothing but darkness. She checked everywhere and started to get worried, so she told her husband to come help her.

Martha started thinking of the worst, she said, "Frank! What if they got kidnapped, or even worse... killed! We must find them!"

They started to run out of breath trying to find their missing children.

Frank said, "Martha! Calm down. They have to be somewhere."

Frank started to comfort Martha as she cried in his arms.

Frank asked her, "Have you looked in the attic?"

"No, why would they go up there?"

"You never know!"

Martha and Frank rushed upstairs to their attic and looked around with panic. Martha saw the chair and called Frank.

She asked, "Do you remember buying this?"

He said, "No, but I recognize it. Wasn't it your mother's?"

"Oh! Yes it was, but I thought I threw it away."

"I don't know"

Frank feels his foot crunch something, and he looks down and sees the note that Jesse dropped. He opens it and it is titled "Year 3000" and it read, "COVID 30 pandemic, fires, riots, rebellion, bombs, hornets, celebrities dying" along with many other things. At the bottom of the paper it said:

Dear my lovely grandchildren,

I need to protect you from this terrible year, I will return you to Earth when this year is over, but for now I want you to stay with me. The Hiding is a beautiful place with mountains and beaches. I have a cozy home where we all will sleep and eat. I am sorry if you don't want to go, but I am doing it for the both of you. Much love, Grandma Isabel

Frank looks at Martha with his eyes open wide. They both stood, speechless with many questions and assumptions boiling in their minds. Tears started forming in Martha's eyes; she wanted to go find them, but her husband said it is very dangerous and it could put their lives at risk. They knew that their children would return eventually, but their parents were just thinking about how they would not see them for an entire year. Frank told his wife they could trust her mother. The couple walked into their living room thinking about their children in this unknown place. They were also scared for their own safety after seeing the endless list of terrible things that were going to happen this year. In the meantime, they would just wait helplessly for their children for an entire year, daydreaming about what awful thing the year 3000 would bring them first.

Jayne Patrick

Age: 13, Grade: 8

School Name: Binford Middle School, Richmond, VA

Educator: Kirstie Hein Sadler

Category: Short Story

Stone Gazebo

A small gust of wind hits my face, waking me up out of whatever trance I was just in. The only thing in front of me at the moment is a small stone gazebo. A stone path leading up to its entrance, which I happen to be standing on. The stone is cool against my feet, and I decide to walk towards the gazebo. Surrounding the gazebo are pink rose bushes that reach around 4 feet tall, some of the roses growing around the pillars holding the roof above. Once I sit down, I can feel my body start to settle into the seat and get comfortable. After looking around, there's so much more around than I originally thought.

The hills in front of me are caked with flowers, arranged in multitudes of colors. The flowers slowly shake and dance with the soft breeze. The hills seem never-ending, miles and miles of flowers and grass. Looking behind me, it's almost the same. However, a small pond rests amidst the rolling hills. The pond isn't too far, but not worth getting up to walk over to. The pond glimmers in the light of the now rising sun. The sky a mix of pinks and blues. Time seems to slow down drastically while I sit, the sun hasn't moved an inch. The cold air pierces my skin a little, but it's not enough to bother me too much. The scenery is so soft against my eyes, my brain wanting to absorb every little detail before this ends.

Something is telling me to get up, something in my head. A strong urge for me to leave my seat and run, but I can't get up. I feel stuck in my seat, and I can't move. Nothing is physically holding me back, it's just something in my head. There's no sound, however, the urge is screaming at me. It feels like something is yelling into my ears, but there's no sound besides the slight whistle of the breeze. I want to cover my ears and hide, but there's nothing even happening. All of it is just an uncomfortable feeling. An uncomfortable feeling that I can keep under control.

The sun never moves, the breeze still blowing, the flowers shaking in the wind. Nothing has changed, but it all feels like too much. The sound of the wind against my ears feels so much louder, the cold makes me want to peel my skin off. The once peaceful scenery seems so annoying, and noisy. I want to leave. I need to leave and take a moment but I can't get up. The same feeling of not being able to move sits, and refuses to leave. I'm so tired, I want to leave. Where would I go? Is there anything else besides where I am? Am I truly stuck? Is there a reason for me to be panicking at this level?

The feeling is still here. It won't go, I don't think it'll ever leave. The peaceful scenery seems to be separated from me, through a piece of thick glass. I can't hear it, I can't feel it, I can't experience it like I used to. The cold stone feels numb, the flowers grey, the sky blank. It's still how I saw it and felt it before, but it isn't going through my brain correctly. Everything is the same, and everything will stay the same, the only thing wrong with it is me.

Bridget Plank

Age: 15, Grade: 9

School Name: Maggie L Walker Governor's School, Richmond, VA

Educator: Michele Surat

Category: Personal Essay & Memoir

Over the Edge

Over the Edge

The ground felt soft under my feet as I made the trek out to the waterfall. I smelled the crisp clean air and heard the cacophony of sounds of the tropical forest alive around me. I was very eager for this journey. We walked for what seemed to be some time, and about halfway through our hike, I could barely contain my excitement any longer.

We came upon the first waterfall. This was the smaller one, the guide explained. Somewhere around 30 feet tall. The bottom of the waterfall contained a pristine pool that looked refreshing on this warm winter day. Where we visited, it was warm in the wintertime, unlike the cold Virginia air of my home.

The journey continued. The trees thickened as the bird songs drifted through them. Leaves rustled in the breeze. Some animals lurked in the lush foliage nearby watching our hike along the path. I anticipated what lay ahead and was exhilarated by the thought.

Finally, we had reached our destination. The 65-foot waterfall came into view. The water seemed like a full cup, just spilling over the edge. It was breathtaking. Similar to the first waterfall, the bottom contained a sparkling pool of water, just around my height in the deeper sections, as I was shorter then than now. I imagined that the water would be refreshing and that this new experience would be one that I wouldn't soon forget.

We quickly set our stuff down on some boulders by the pool at the bottom. The guide expertly told us everything we needed to know. Three paths led down the waterfall. The middle one looked the most menacing, with water gushing down and slippery footing for any who dared to use it. The two on the sides had a milder feel, the left still pouring more water than the right. I had a plan.

I stepped into my harness and tightened it meticulously. I then watched the guide bound down the waterfall into the pool. It looked amazing. When it was my turn, I took off down the path enthralled by the quest before me. Once I got to the top, I noticed the shallowness of the pool of water spilling over the edge, succumbing to gravity, and flowing into the pool at the bottom. A few guides were braced at the top, ready to help me.

Taking a hesitant step into the cold water, I felt any worry leave me. I stepped cautiously from one rock to the next in the clear, cool water and voiced to the guide my plan to descend via the path to the left. He helped me get clipped into the rope for safety and then explained what I should do. I lowered myself to a seated position, hanging on the edge of the flowing water. The pool waited 65 feet below me where the next guide stood, ready to help once I reached the bottom.

I glanced down once to see if all was well. It was time for me to go. I reached one foot down into the running water. Then the next. I continued taking strides down the waterfall, rather gracefully for my age, might I add. I felt a thrilling sensation. After the water had sprayed in my face and I had gotten down the path, the guide at the bottom helped me get unclipped. This first time, I had not fully realized the depths of the pool yet, so I fell just over my head. Then, swimming out to the shallower portions of the pool, I greeted my mother who had descended behind me.

My next time at the top of the trail, I chose the path on the right, then the left again, never daring to go down the middle. After my last time, I felt sad. I knew I would soon have to leave the gorgeous waterfall and pool.

We waited patiently for the last people from the group to finish. We unharnessed and got our things together to leave. I took one last look at the waterfall. The flowing waters, trees rustling in the breeze, pristine pool, and rainforest life would forever stay in my memory. I heaved a sigh and turned back to the trail.

Smrithe Rajesh

Age: 13, Grade: 8

School Name: George H Moody Middle School, Henrico, VA

Educator: Patricia Walker

Category: Novel Writing

Guller High

Brief summary:

Sylvia is a 15 year old girl who lives in a world which is divided by wealth. Those who live a rich and luxurious lifestyle are called the "Elites" while those who are not as wealthy are considered the "Non-Elites." Sylvia is a Non-Elite and when she is granted the opportunity to attend a high-end Elite school named Guller High, she automatically accepts it. However, through the people and interactions that she has, she realizes that maybe Guller isn't as fabulous as she thought it was. Join Sylvia as she spends her days among the rich and famous and discover whether or not she has what it takes to fit in with the Elites and if she really wants to be one of them.

Excerpt:

July 1st, 2019

I fiddled anxiously with my blue skirt as my mom's white Jeep Wrangler brought us closer and closer to our destination. The cloth seat was uncomfortable for my sweaty skin and the atmosphere was thick and heavy. Today was the day I was going to be examined for one of the most elite programs in the entire country, Guller Prep School. Their acceptance rate was close to about nothing making it almost irresistible for any teenager who had aspirations to make it big in the world. Those who got into the academy were admired upon in society and got better opportunities in every field they applied for. Mother told me that it didn't matter if I wasn't accepted to Guller, and that the school was just for "people who wanted the easy way out", but deep down I knew she wanted me to get in. With all this immense pressure that was forced upon me, the car trip to the examination hall wasn't exactly pleasant. I just wanted to get this application process over with and hopefully seem like the perfect candidate for their institution. The Jeep came to a sudden halt and before I knew it, mother and I were parked in front of the shiny walls of the prep school. The building looked magnificent as I gawked in awe at the white and clean institute with all it had to offer. On the top of the building, there was a dome which was covered with colored pieces of glass and the pillars all around had a gold trimming to the sides.

"You think that looks nice, then you should come and see the inside" a voice echoed behind me. I turned around to find a woman, who looked to be in her thirties, staring back at me with black hair and sharp green eyes. She was stunningly beautiful and immediately captured my gaze with her short yet sweet smile. "Hello, my name is Jolie, and I will be taking you to the testing room," she said. The lady then strutted in through the mahogany doors and opened it for us to see. The inside was even more of a majestic sight. Books were scattered all across its pathway and stairs of marble led to places that seemed impossible to reach. It was all so....pristine. "Now if you make your way down the 3A hall to the second door on the left, you will see the checkout and the place where you will be tested. Good luck." The woman walked away to go greet the others and left my mother, and I went to face what might be the hardest challenge I had to fulfill.

"Well this is it, kiddo," Mom said, "We're about 45 minutes early, and Mommy has a call to take, so why don't you find something fun to do on your phone?"

"Alright Mom, I'll loosen up my nerves."

"That's the spirit!" She then picked up her phone and chatted away quietly as I stared at the ground, wondering what I should do. Clueless of what I should do, I decided to just walk around aimlessly and try to calm myself down in this huge place. It sounded like a mundane activity, but hey, what else was I supposed to do? As I walked by, I tried to examine everything around me. There was just so much to take in, and I wanted to remember everything about it. I started to pick up the pace a bit but in my hastiness, I bumped into the

figure of a boy who looked about two years older than me.

"I'm i'm... sorry are you alright--" the boy stared at me with wide eyes and started to bolt it down the hall. "Hey, where are you going?" I screamed and chased after him. Everything in my mind told me it was best not to follow this guy, but I couldn't stop my legs from chasing after him. He ran and ran all the way down the small passageway and entered through a petite door behind a wall. Huh? That was peculiar. This passageway was never included in the brochures that they handed out to us. The institute probably left this out because it was something that shouldn't be bothered with. I clearly knew I shouldn't go in; it was a risky move. However, there was a small voice that urged me to enter this strange area. Perhaps it was the fact I wasn't thinking clearly or because I was bored, but it felt like I had to be in there. So after a while of thinking, I decided to take the initiative. I breathed out a heavy sigh and touched the cold metal handle. It's now or never, I thought and I finally opened the door. "Hello?" I said and strolled around the inside. My surroundings were dim, with just a tiny cast of a light in the background. "Is anyone here?" It seemed like there wasn't. That was great. I followed him to the most useless room in this entire building, and I only had 15 minutes until my exam. I turned around to face the door and make my grand exit when suddenly, a hand grabbed my arm tightly. I had about no time to react to this notion because instantly my body was slammed down towards the hard wooden floor.

"What is your business here?" a voice growled deeply into my right ear, "Are you here for information?"

"No, no. I was lost. That's all, and if you mind, I would like to get up." My body was released from the person's harsh clasp, and I whirled around to see who had just held me in such a scary position. A girl with braids that were untidy and brown stared at me with a frightening growl. I quickly darted my eyes to the scared boy from before and two other figures who stared at me with fear. They were all wearing the same Guller Prep uniform with the exception of a few rips and stains on their clothes. Were they.....students?

"Are you one of the kids trying out for the program?" the girl asked.

"Y-yes I actually have it in about 15 minutes." She scoffed and pulled out a stick of gum from her back pocket.

"Well don't bother trying to enter into this dump, it's all a big scam anyways." The girl chewed noisily on her stick of gum and blew obnoxiously big bubbles in my face.

"I don't understand. This is supposed to be a prestigious place meant only for...."

"The best of the best all across the fifty states. Yeah yeah- we know." I couldn't believe what she had just said. Was even trying to attend this program a huge waste?

"You have no proof that Guller is a bad school!"

"Or do I?" she smirked as she commented on my poor comeback. "Look at Jamie," she pointed at the guy from earlier, "His clothes are ripped and his mouth is bleeding." Come to think of it, I hadn't even noticed how Jamie looked. He looked awful with his tiresome, gloomy look and broken jaw. "He was made as an "example" in front of the entire institute just because he was 10 minutes late to the sixth period. Guller breaks these people instead of building them." My head started to swirl with all this newfound information. This prep school was all I was working towards. It couldn't be true. "Don't you notice that none of those men and women who graduate from this prison are ever happy? They live their whole lives reminiscing on the traumatic experience of this program. Do you want that?"

"You're a crazy woman!" I screamed at the braided girl as I tried not to faint from all the shock. It was all too much for me to digest. I then heard a name being called from the reception table.

"Silvia Dulce," the receptionist called. "Please report to the front desk to prepare for your 2035 Guller Prep School Exam for Excellence."

"Well Sylvia," the girl replied in a cocky tone "I hope you do well on your.....test." I walked out in a phased manner as I stood in front of the reception table. Maybe I shouldn't apply to the "dump."

zhenya rance

Age: 13, Grade: 8

School Name: St Catherine's School, Richmond, VA

Educator: Julie Elmore

Category: Short Story

The Platonic Soulmate

Christmas was coming up, and these new sets of electronics had just arrived at the stores called *Soul Buds*. These new uber ear phones allowed people to talk to their soulmate and only their soulmate. Seventeen year old Athena received a pair on Christmas Eve, she immediately ran to her room with the earbuds. Everyone at school had these earbuds, and she often felt left out because she was the only one who hadn't spoken to her soulmate.

At first when Athena had put in her new *Soul Buds* she heard nothing, but then this loud ear piercing crack of static shot through her earbuds. Athena later on came to the conclusion she had a broken pair. Since tomorrow was Christmas, she couldn't return it till the 27th. She called her friend Toria to tell her the news.

"Hi, Tori, I think something's wrong with my earbuds," Athena told her friend.

"What's wrong with them?" asked Tori.

"When I put them in, all I hear is static. Should I put them in rice?"

"That just means that your soulmate doesn't want to speak to you. It's not broken you're just a people repellant. That must suck- oh, my boyfriend is calling me I got to go. But remember this whole soulmate this is a hoax for lonely people to buy into, I mean look at me I found my soulmate without the *SoulBuds*."

"Did you just call me a loner-"

"Anyway, I gotta go bye!"

"Wow, just great. Just as I get my *Soulbuds* my soulmate doesn't want to talk to me. I guess I'll just keep trying to talk to him" thought Athena.

A month has passed, and Athena is talking to her dormant soulmate about the one time she snorted apple juice while laughing at her friends at her lunch table. When she least expected it she heard her soulmate talk for the first time.

"Man, you sure are making it hard for me to not want to talk to you."

Athena was so happy that she had finally heard something other than static for the first time, but she didn't want to scare him away, she had to be careful. She asked him a few questions about himself. Turns out her soulmate is a 17 year old boy named Chris, he enjoys playing soccer and listening to music. Athena still had one more question, why did he avoid her? It was risky to ask but Athena did it anyway.

"Hey Chris, why didn't you want to talk to me?"

"Because I don't believe in this whole soulmate crap, for all you know they probably paired us up by random."

"Then why do you even have the earbuds? It's like you downloaded a dating app just to not use it." questioned Athena.

"I thought they were normal earphones. They are in the same section as the normal ones. Plus I already have a girlfriend. I wouldn't purposely pick up something as lame as this. I'm not looking for a partner, I should probably return them."

Athena's Heart sank, dropped through her stomach all the way down to her toes. "*Her soulmate has a girlfriend, of course he has a girlfriend. It was just too good to be true.*" Athena felt like the most unlucky teenager to ever live. Imagine everyone around you has something you could never have, and when you think you finally have it, you don't. Athena wasn't going to let it get to her because in order to get Chris to finally talk to her she had to talk to static for a whole month, making him fall in love with her shouldn't be that hard, right?

"Hello, Athena you there?"

Athena snapped out of her trance,

"Yes, I'm here. Since you have a girlfriend could we at least still talk to each other?"

"Sure, why not. I'm kinda too lazy to return it anyway."

Right now all she could feel was jealousy, she was jealous of her friends that had soulmates that actually liked them and jealous of Chris's girlfriend.

"Alright I can work with this, all I have to do now is make him like me."

The day went on as normal and Athena constructed her plan to capture her soulmate's interest, first Athena planned to find out more about his girlfriend. Is she nice? Is she pretty? Does she eat pineapple on her pizza? And lastly, what are her flaws? Finding out everything about her is the key to being better than her. The second step to success is to find out what Chris is interested in, his hobbies. And the third step is to not let Chris find out that she is planning to sabotage his relationship with his girlfriend, that would be a disaster.

By the time spring came around Athena and Chris had built an inseparable friendship, they played online games together, had meals together, and sometimes they'd fall asleep on call. They were as close as friends could get over earbuds. Athena's plan had been in action for a while and she had found it to be pretty effective, her bond with Chris seems to irritate his girlfriend Vicki. Athena often hears Vicki yelling at him for not paying attention to her.

"It won't be long until he breaks up with her!"

Athena was right, the next time Chris had called her through *SoulBuds* he announced that he'd broken up with his girlfriend.

"Hey Chris, whats up"

"I'm not doing that great, Vicki and I broke up"

"Oh no what happened" Athena tried her best to not sound ecstatic.

"She said I stopped paying attention to her and she just got bored of me, Athena do you think I'm boring?"

"Of Course not, she's so wrong about you. You are really funny and super interesting I don't understand why she would say something like tha-"

Athena's confession was cut off by her phone ringing, she picked her phone up. The caller ID reads Toria. *"She's probably going to vent to me about some dumb cheersquad drama, most likely not important"* Athena decides to ignore the call.

"Sorry about that, where was I. Oh yeah don't listen to her you'll find someone who is meant for you, sometimes the person that's right for you is closer than you expect-" Athena was interrupted again by Tori's call.

"Ugh, Chris I gotta go. My friend won't stop calling me I think I Should check on her real quick"

"Okay..."

Athena answers Tori's call.

"Yo, whats up. You called me twice, so it's probably important, let me guess Tammy stole your cheer skirt again because she thinks it fits her better, right-"

"We broke up." Toria spits out.

"What"

"I broke up with him. He doesn't pay any attention to me anymore; he just sits there talking to some other girl on his earbuds. He doesn't need Soulbuds! I'm his girlfriend, I was supposed to be his soulmate. Why is he ignoring me to talk to someone else?" Tori cries out.

Athena's mind was racing with several questions, she never thought that her best friend could be the one she was trying to sabotage. Yeah, sometimes Victoria wasn't the nicest person at times but it doesn't make it right to harm her. Athena immediately started to feel guilt as she thought about the whole situation, the right thing to do was to tell Chris to continue ignoring her after she was told he was in a relationship. Athena had no clue on what to do. Does she tell her friend the truth about her deception and risk losing her friend or does she continue to talk to Chris behind Tori's back? The first option is very tempting, but she knew what she needed to do to make things right.

"Victoria, I have something to tell you, but it's going to make the situation worse"

"What is it Thena, I can't possibly think of anything that can make this worse?"

"I am the girl Chris was talking to on the *Soulbuds*."

There, she said it.

"Who's Chris? I'm talking about my boyfriend Jason I don't know who you are talking about"

"Huh? Wait, so your boyfriend isn't Chris?"

"Oh no"

Athena has reached the epiphany that she has broken up some other couple. But that doesn't waver her decision to make things right.

"Hey Tori, I got to go. How about we grab some ice cream later, it might cheer you up."

"Okay I guess I'll see you later."

Athena rushed to her *Soulbuds*, she had to do something very important. After Athena came to the conclusion that she could had been extremely selfish she figured the only way to fix what she had done was to explain herself to Chris' girlfriend.

"Hey Chris, are you there?"

snif "Yeah I'm here"

"I did something horrible and I will totally understand if you decide to never talk to me ever again. I'm not sure

you have realized it but I knowingly dragged you away from Vicki just so I could have someone to talk to. I have a friend who's boyfriend got so caught up in his *Soulbuds* that he ignored her unknowingly, their relationship ended and now both of them are miserable. Just because I want happiness doesn't give me the right to take it from someone else. Please try to work things out with Vicki and I'm sorry for ever trying to split you guys apart."

"Uh, wow. What would someone even say to that- I gotta go. I'll talk to Vicki, I appreciate your honesty. But I think we should stop talking for a while since it caused this mess in the first place" Declared Chris.

"I understand" Athena whispered.

It was fun while it lasted but she knew that it was time to put away the *Soulbuds* for a long time, in the meantime she had her best friend Tori to hang out with.

In the end Athena learned an important lesson about what it means to be selfless and considerate of others. Athena had the choice to do the wrong thing and end up with what she wanted, but Athena chose to sacrifice her happiness for her soulmate's happiness. Athena realized that what she was doing was wrong and that hurting someone else to be happy isn't the way she wants things to happen.

Kacey Randall

Age: 17, Grade: 12

School Name: Manchester High School, Midlothian, VA

Educator: Rebecca Lynch

Category: Humor

Kraft Singles

Growing up in Peru, New York was quite the experience, in the sense that it wasn't. The tiny town had nothing to do for fun if you were above the age of seven, which meant that the older kids had to make their own entertainment. In the Jones household, that often meant games of flag football in the backyard, looking for snapping turtles out by the creek, and most importantly, practical jokes.

I was resting on the couch, lazily flipping through a book when my younger brother Evan snooped into the kitchen, mumbling something about going to the grocery store.

"What are you looking for?"

He poked his head around the kitchen door. "Do we have any Kraft singles?"

"They should be in the drawer. I thought you didn't like cheese."

He gave me a mischievous grin, a smile that I had come to recognize over the course of his seventeen years as a sign of trouble. He was planning something, no doubt.

"Oh, it's not for me. It's for Nate."

Sweet, sweet Nate. Nathan, our eldest brother, often found himself to be the butt of our best jokes, much to his dismay. He was cut from a different cloth than his younger siblings, always content to stay home and read 19th century poetry books instead of going on our adventures. His prudish, passive-aggressive nature made him the perfect target.

Evan motioned for me to follow him downstairs. As we descended to the bottom floor, I could hear the shower running followed by the occasional burst of whistling. Evan motioned for me to hide with him.

"I'm going to put the cheese right there." He pointed to a spot on the floor, about two feet from the bathroom door. The plan was simple: carefully calculate the length of Nathan's stride and place the cheese right where he would step. Nathan was a bit of a clean freak, and took his showers very seriously; he's the only guy I know that owns, let alone uses, a loofah. His reaction to having processed cheese squished between his toes was sure to be priceless.

"Ok soldier," I said. "You've got one shot at this. Make me proud, son."

Evan carefully unwrapped the bright orange square and ran over to the hallway in front of the bathroom. It took all my power not to laugh out loud as I watched him carefully measure his steps, adjusting and readjusting to find the perfect spot. He gingerly placed it on the carpet and sprinted back to our hiding spot. In the bathroom, the shower squeaked off.

I felt Evan go still beside me. I grabbed his arm, trying to tug him up the stairs before we could be caught in the act.

“It’s in the wrong spot.”

I whipped my head to look at him. “Are you crazy? It’s too late now.” He shook his head and pulled his arm out of my grasp.

“I have to move it or he’ll miss it. Go upstairs. I’ll be there in a minute.”

I sighed before running up the stairs and racing to my previous perch on the couch. Moments later, Evan sprinted into the living room and sat beside me. We smirked at each other, laughing quietly. At that moment, Dad walked into the room carrying his newspaper.

He paused, suspicious eyes bouncing between us. He knew our tricks too well. Dad watched us struggle to contain our excitement. After a moment, he let out a sigh.

“What did you guys do?”

I shrugged, returning to my book. Evan just smiled and rested his hands behind his head. We could faintly hear Nate’s shaky tenor voice singing some pop song from the floor below. After a painful wait, the bathroom door opened.

“What the-- cheese?! Who the heck left cheese on the floor!?”

We began laughing hysterically, knowing full well that Nathan could hear us below. Fuming, he made his way up the stairs, hobbling awkwardly on one foot. His face was bright red, a sight that only made me laugh harder.

“Of all the things to choose, you grab cheese? Cheese?!?”

Gasping for breath, Evan stood up. He began walking to the kitchen.

“I’ll get you back,” Nathan promised. “Just you wait.”

Evan and I snickered. We were used to Nathan’s hollow threats. I grinned at my older brother.

“No you won’t.”

Elijah Redding

Age: 17, Grade: 12

School Name: Veritas Classical Christian School, Richmond, VA

Educator: Sunny Rosebro

Category: Poetry

David and Goliath

The Story of David and Goliath

'Twas there in Israel-land some years ago,
Where to this day the mighty Jordan flows,
A king so tall and mighty reigned supreme
That giant to his own did he beseem.
When first he was ordained, he served his God
And ruled his people with a righteous rod.
But as his reign drew on, to sin he fell:
For once he went within the temple veil,
For, thinking that the priest of God would ne'er arrive,
He took upon himself the sins to shrive
Of all the people with a sacrifice.
And not this once alone, but truly twice
Did he the statutes of the Lord ignore:
For he had kept to him the spoils of war,
Which God Omnipotent had told him slay;
He, choosing, thus, the broad and wicked way.
And so, it came to pass, that of his line
No more should take the throne by God's design.
So, thus, forlorn, accurst, enthroned he sate,
Embattling oft against a pagan state,
One fight a loss, the next a vict'ry glad;
Until the time should come a little lad,
A shepherd boy, son youngest, David hight
Should rule the people with a heart contrite.

'Twas on a day, a battle fierce was fought,
The pagan kings a giant champion brought:
Twelve cubits high he was, undefeated ere,
And so afeared were Jewish warriors there,
That none would go to fight throughout the day,
But craven all, cowering, doing naught but pray.
The Hebrew king, as well, a-quaking shook,
Not doing else, but peering out to look,
And seeing if the champion yet had fled,
And to some greater battle far had sped.
But O alas! the king each morn awoke,
Then heard the giant taunting with his jokes
And laughing, calling them a coward host.
Each morn the champion great renewed his boast,
Each morn the craven Jews renew their fright;
So, none would dare go out afield to fight.
Until the day arose that God decreed,

Should've been the one on which the giant bleeds.

For David came at noon to serve the meal
And with a song to raise the gen'ral weal.
When heard he then the giants loud berate
And how the champion David's God did hate.
He, hearing well the giant's blasphemy
Against his God who'd set his people free,
Young David, looking round, was greatly shamed
At such a frightened host, and thus proclaimed:

"O Israelites! O men of Jacob's race!
Whom God did bring to here, a promised place,
Where honey, milk, and fertile land abound
And any righteous want may soon be found,
Which land is now by pagan hosts defiled,
How can ye stand to see your God reviled?
Remember not, O men, how God hath saved
You out of bondage and did cause the waves
Of Egypt's sea to stand up like a wall,
And caused it 'pon the Pharaoh's men to fall?
Have ye forgot that when thru Canaan-land
We passed, how God still made the sun to stand?
And how once seven times we'd walked around
Great Jericho, its walls came tumbling down?
I know if not God's e'er done aught for ye,
But I could tell you times he d'livered me
From lions, cunning wolves, and fearsome bears,
And many sheep from out the hunter's snare.
Have ye not seen how God supplies the bird
And how he doth each morn the lily gird?
If God well guides and d'rects the sparrow fay,
How much more ye who walk the narrow way,
And have a priest, revered, who for you prays
And if ye sin, a ram or bullock slays?
So be it thus, if ye, still quaking, frown,
Then I alone will cut the giant down!"
Thus spake young David and left thence them all,
And gat himself five stones, smooth, slick, and small.
But, yea, his brother Eliab, the first,
This wrathful speech to David, he rehearsed:

"O little child, why didst thou leave the sheep
Which has thy father 'structed thee to keep?
Of all, I know thy naughty heart the best,
And how thou camest here to simply rest.
This field's the place where thou shouldst ever stay;
Get back and see if any sheep have strayed!"

Said Eliab and spat upon his face,
But to him David answered that disgrace:

"O brother mine, what is it I have done?
I came to here right now the food to run;
But lo! perchance the One who spake our laws,
Has guided me to here for such a cause!"

The king, ashamed, chastised, still lay in bed
But hearing David's speech, to David said:

"O David, hither come, my armor try.
For those few stones from yonder brooklet nigh
Will never do against that giant fierce,
But with my sword, shalt thou alone him pierce."

But David trying on the armor roy'1
Then found each further step, a further toil.
He, failing too, the kingly sword to lift,
Much less a fearsome foeman's foil to rift,
And throwing off the armor of the king,
And picking up his staff and leathern sling,
He, saying those were all he'd ever had
And that, with them, he'd always come back glad,
Thus said a prayer of help and then went out,
He, resolute and calm without a doubt,
Assured that he was on the side of good,
He sidled up to where the giant stood.
The giant, seeing him, let loose a sound
Of scorn, and, thus, to those who'd circled round:

“Am I a dog ye me with staves assail?
Have ye a dearth of warriors dought and hale?
Perchance thou thinkst in grace my sword I'll still,
But I in ev'ry battle fought, I've killed!”

The heathen then let loose a battle-cry
But David answered to him this reply:
“Thou comst at me with glittering armor gold,
And iron arms so smartly forged of old.
Thou hast a shield emblazoned with a tale
Of gods demonic, that have always failed.
Thy hauberk is with purest gold embost,
Thy greaves are worth a superhuman cost,
And thou with silver boots the ground dost trod;
But in my heart I have the Living God.
With costly arms like thee I'm not arrayed,
Nor do I come with diamond-hilted blade,
But in the name of Israel's God I come,
Who bideth not in graven idols dumb;
But, yea, inside his faithful servants' hearts
He dwells, and from those hearts he ne'er departs.
This day shalt be the one that dies thy seed,
With thy dead carcass I the fowls shall feed.
At last shall I thy godless mocking stay,
And thou shalt know that God, in Israel, lives today!”

He, saying so, a smooth, slick stone he slang,
Just as a washing-line strecht taut doth hang,
And some unwary walker, walking by
Sees not the line with clothes hung out to dry.
Then lo! he, turning 'round, is swiftly felled,
And, falling down, lets loose a piercing yell.
Just so the path of David's flying stone,
Which through the air is truly, tautly, thrown.
Behold the giant boldly stepping forth,
His forehead met the pebble on its course.
So then, the stone his senses squarely struck,
And thus, he fell, face-first upon the muck.
So David, running where the giant lay,
He, with the Champions sword, his head did flay.
Thus, lifting up the giant's head on high,
He up to heaven raised a happy cry;
And, taking back the giant's severed head
To camp, he told them that the pagan's dead.
To all the jocund host--- who while he'd left

Had looked upon the fight with hope bereft,
Assured that David brave would lose the fight,
But when they saw they rock upon its flight,
And that the giant's forehead it might strike,
Then O what joy went forth when on a pike,
They saw young David raise the giant's crown,
Then joy and gladness did in all abound---
To all the jocund host who round him pressed,
Great David called to them this proud address:

“O coward Jews! Ye sons of Abraham
Who stood here trembling like some frightened lambs,
When seeing they a wily, cunning fox,
Then lo! the shepherd drives it off with rocks.
So, God (for 'twas not I) did guide my dart
And made it split the giant's skull apart.
For God my shepherd is: He makes me lie
In pastures green, and leads still waters by.
My soul doth he restore; for His name's sake
He through the paths of righteousness me takes.
Yea though thru death's dark shad'wy vale I tread,
No evil shall I fear; by Thee I'm led.
Thy rod, Thy staff, the both me comfort oft
A table Thou dost kindly raise aloft
When in the presence of mine enemy.
My head with oil Thou hast anointed me;
My cup doth overflow, each day of life
Yea, surely, goodness, mercy follow nigh.
Within God's house I evermore shall dwell,
And here fore'er God's goodness I shall tell.
So may you all this day recall to mind
That God in anyone can valor find.
Henceforth let fear be never in you found
But courage, virtue should in each abound.”

So saying thus, up high upon a post
The giant's head he placed, and then to roast
A fatted calf did they anon begin.
For what a day was this! That they did win
A vict'ry that they'd never thought to've won,
If not for David, Jesse's youngest son,
Who with his greatest courage, through and through,
And with his God, the pagan champion slew.

Mason Rowley

Age: 16, Grade: 11

School Name: Appomattox Regional Governor's School, Chesterfield, VA

Educators: Gail Giewont, Patty Smith

Category: Flash Fiction

Model Village

Arwen is a small town in the state of Virginia. It's known for a country star who lived there for a year and a painter who had a heart attack at the local eatery. It's a place that smells of rust and stagnant water, where you kneel for Christ and stand for the flag at every local little league game, where every bedroom has a cross and every yard is ad space for the newest local Republican. They have a barbeque every year on the wrong side of the tracks with a ticket price to enter just high enough to keep out everyone who lives there. On the wrong side of the tracks is all the businesses; a pharmacy that gives kids a free soda and is about to be bought out by a large corporation, a gas station with the best food in the town, with owners who get complaints about their accents, an italian restaurant with an all-hispanic staff that the right side likes to ignore. The wrong side is dilapidated, the main neighborhood is a trailer park flanked on all sides by run down houses and three low-income apartment complexes. At night, the whole town is lit up by various corporations; golden arches over the highway, spotlighted sonoco pumps, a neon-bright 7-11 spilling light over the parking lot.

In that 7-11 is Officer Joseph Cook. He's getting a chocolate eclair, an extra-large colombian roast, and a bottle of aspirin for a minor headache developing. He pays the cashier, drops the spare change in a glass jar on the counter, and heads out the door.

He opens the door to his squad car and steps inside. He's set to patrol the local housing complex tonight. There's been reports of junkies smoking crack on the playground. Crackheads are expected at this point, it's the height of the crack epidemic and it's affecting everywhere, places as large as NYC and as small as Arwen. He starts the engine of his Crown Victoria and starts his route.

In the local apartments, Deonte Travis is hanging out with his friend Jerome Handley. They've got Deonte's box tv playing the station with all the black-and-white westerns, but it's just background noise. The two are passing a spliff, one of several in the apartment. Jerome is making Hamburger Helper for a quick dinner. After eating the food and finishing the weed, they step outside to get snacks from the local 7-11 and to feel the cool air. They step outside just in time to see a police car round the corner.

In that police car is Officer Joseph Cook, and he has no idea that within an hour he will be bleeding out on the ground with a 9mm bullet through his kidney. Deonte and Jerome have no idea that the officer they glimpsed as they left the apartment will result in them being convicted to life in prison. And nobody knows what happened that night. Everyone was asleep or away. It was too dark for the cameras to see. But all the same, at 1:03 at night, Officer Cook will approach two men he had suspicions about. He will draw his gun and demand they put their hands up. The two men will rush him, struggle over the gun, and in the scuffle a bullet would go under his vest, rupturing his kidney. The two men will get away, and Officer Cook will be buried as a hero.

Mason Rowley

Age: 16, Grade: 11

School Name: Appomattox Regional Governor's School, Chesterfield, VA

Educator: Gail Giewont

Category: Poetry

Black Bird

*The hunter is chasing you down as we speak, burn little black bird burn
The hunter is chasing you down for your beak, burn little black bird burn
He'll pick you clean of feathers, pristine, burn little black bird burn*

*The hunter is loading his boomstick with lead, burn little black bird burn
He's gaining on you and seeing only red, burn little black bird burn
The hunter is wishing you bad luck and death, burn little black bird burn*

*He'll cook you and make you a pie little bird, burn little black bird burn
He'll smoke you and choke you with smog little bird, burn little black bird burn
Take to the skies, to be free of their lies, burn little black bird burn*

Rian Sherod

Age: 17, Grade: 12

School Name: St Catherine's School, Richmond, VA

Educator: John Morgan

Category: Personal Essay & Memoir

When My Life Changed

When My Life Changed

“We are going to adopt.” Those were the five words, seventeen letters, and six syllables that changed my world forever. I was seven years old sitting at C's C's pizza, indulging in strawberry lemonade when my parents told my siblings and me the news. Immediately, I shrieked with excitement because I had been begging my parents for another sibling. This was the best news ever.

When the day came to meet my sister, I thought I was going to throw up. She was only ten months older than me so I really wanted her to like me. I was waiting at the door of my dad's job when a blue Subaru Outback pulled up. When my parents walked outside a lady with short brown hair greeted them. I had seen the lady a few times before because she met with our family and came to our house a few times, but I never understood why. She opened the door to the back seat and out stepped a skinny little girl, with tan skin and brown curly hair, he looked just like the pictures we had of her on our fridge. Her name was Julia. When we were introduced, my hands were so sweaty that I thought she was going to say something. Thankfully, she said nothing. She was actually super nice but very quiet. We rode my bikes and climbed trees for hours that day. I remember dreaming about what we would do when we met and that day everything I dreamed about seemed to be coming true. I had a new sibling. Life was perfect.

After a couple of weeks of her living with us, I started to notice some things about Julia that were different from most kids I'd know. She was pretty against taking consistent showers, had to take about five pills every morning, stored food under her bed, got angry really easily, and seemed more comfortable on the floor than in her bed. Julia was also very protective of the lady with brown hair, who had come to visit twice in the two weeks she'd been there. Although I loved her and was happy she was my new sister, I found all of those things a little odd. When I asked my mom and dad about the things I noticed they explained that the reason Julia was with us and not her biological mom and dad was because she was abused by them; she went through a lot of hard times very early in life. The reason Julia was the way she was, was because she was suffering from PTSD and wasn't used to a “normal” life. We were her sixth family in her only seven years of life. She was still trying to adjust, so we needed to make sure that she always felt safe and loved. They also explained to me that the lady with the brown hair was her Social Worker named Mrs.Morgan. She had been with Julia since she was taken away from her biological mom and dad, and she was so protective of her because that's who she felt the most comfortable with. She saved her. She was her family.

Eleven years later and Julia has been officially adopted, and has been for about eight years now. Now I am her family, and she is mine. Because we're so close in age, and both girls, we've grown and experienced so much of life together. I always have someone to send tictoks to and go grab Mcdonald's milkshakes with. Paint my nails on my right hand, cause I can never do it with my left, and play hours of Just Dance 2018 with, although neither one of us can actually dance. We always laugh because our personalities are very different, and on paper, we would probably never be friends. She's incredibly loud, dramatic, and confrontational, and I am very calm, avoid confrontation like it's the plague, and fairly easy-going. Although we're pretty different and sometimes get in fights because of our differences, life would be very boring without her. She's unknowingly taught me a lot about living for myself and no one else and to not take crap from anyone; lessons I'll take with me forever. She's also helped me figure out what I want to do with my life. I want to be Mrs.Morgan. I want to help kids feel safe. Julia changed my family's and my life, and we changed hers. I want to have the opportunity to give kids like Julia the family that they deserve. I believe that no one should be alone and no one should feel unwanted. I want to have the chance to make sure as many kids as I can never have to deal with those things. If it wasn't for Mrs.Morgan saving her and trusting my family to love her, we may have never met her, and for that, I will always be thankful for Mrs.Morgan.

Drew Sherrod

Age: 14, Grade: 8

School Name: St Catherine's School, Richmond, VA

Educator: Julie Elmore

Category: Short Story

Dear Jack

February 24th, 2019

Dear Jack,

I'm writing to you to tell you that I really appreciate you being here for me during all of this. I've started to talk to someone about everything that's been going on. I'm honestly not doing a lot of talking, but I guess I'll get there, right? Some guy stole my 4:30pm slot today which sucks. He even left the room smelling like acrylic paint which Ms. Reid (although she would rather have me call her Ashley) desperately tried to cover with an essential oil diffuser. I mean, I would rather paint than talk to Ms. Reid about everything, so this guy is pretty much a genius for coming up with a loophole. And although I feel bad talking about her like this because she is, truly, a good person, talking to her is like talking to the school gossip after you've gotten involved in drama. But I guess it is her job so I'm not entirely sure why I'm nit-picking.

Anyways, I'll probably get over myself and actually talk to her sometime soon even if I don't really want to. I just wanted to tell you how I was doing because I knew that you'd care. Again, thank you for being there that day. It's weird how I barely noticed you before then.

--Sarah

February 19th, 2019

It's strange how when Will got out of school that day he had no idea that he had just finished his last day of school ever, or when we met up to watch *The Matrix*, those final scenes weren't only the last minutes of some movie, but the last few minutes of film he'd ever watched. And I guess it's weird to think that I was both his first friend and the last person he ever saw before a drive home took a turn straight into the headlights of a drunken driver. I pondered this dressed in black, sitting in a church pew. I even thought I saw Will walking through the crowded church, but it was only a strikingly similar imposter who sat down next to me in the back and introduced himself as Jack. He didn't even have half of Will's social skills, and it was as if he had gone unrecognized the whole service, but he endured my ranting outside in the parking lot which was a few feet away from the lame playground accompanied by little kids. They, surrounded by the winter chill, looked at me like I was crazy.

March 4th, 2019

Dear Jack,

I haven't heard from you or seen you in a bit. It's not like you to respond, but I guess I was wondering where you are. I haven't seen you much at school, either. It's kind of like you're only there half of the time. I mean, I thought I saw you yesterday while I was talking to my friend, but she said no one was there. Now she's mad at me because I keep blowing her off to hang out with you and just thinks I'm making excuses. She honestly kind of has a point.

--Sarah

P.S. I stopped talking to Ms. Reid. It wasn't going to do much, anyway.

March 19th, 2019

I walk down the long school hallways and pass Will's locker. On sticky notes and printer paper, messages of "forever in our hearts" and "I miss you" still remained. Some people are still taping things on his locker because they couldn't move on either, but at this point I'm sick of condolences, and I just hope he's at peace wherever he is.

Then I see Jack at the end of the hall and feel a rush of adrenaline, but something feels wrong.

"Hey," he says in his usual chill manner as he walks up to me. His focus veers toward the locker and the silence fills all attempts at casual conversation. He looks down and fidgets with the lock, almost like he knows the code.

April 2nd, 2019

Dear Jack,

Hey. Again, I know that you don't respond, but I do know that you read these. I guess I just wanted to know

what's up with you. If anything is wrong you can talk to me, but at this point I think you don't really want to. So just talk to someone else, I guess.

--Sarah

April 6th, 2019

It's night and the only thing keeping the street from complete darkness is the lamp post about a block from me and Jack. The neon glow from a nearly empty restaurant sets the scene as we stand a few feet away from it, but we have nothing to talk about since he had started to feel more like an inconsistent company than a real friend.

"I just don't know why you care about where I am like it even affects you." He looks over at me and waits for my response. I look up at him and see a fragment of Will in his eyes. This wasn't right.

I look back down.

"Yeah, well it kind of does affect me when we've been friends for a bit and you just decide to blow me off so early," I say with a hint of disbelief in my voice.

As the argument accelerates, I look over at the restaurant and see someone staring at me. Embarrassed, I get in my car. His comment rings in my head as I overthink the conversation.

April 12th, 2019

Dear Jack,

I know you're getting sick of me. But I don't really know, if I'm being honest. I'm kind of confused in general. Anyways, can you meet me at the church playground? I'll leave you alone after, but I just want to talk to you and try to get some closure.

--Sarah

Right now - April 13th, 2019

I sit on that church playground where the little kids were playing when I first talked to Jack. Since that day, it's gotten warmer, but the breeze evens the humidity out. There's a silence between me and Jack as we sit on top of the monkey bars, and I hear the wind whistle as I adjust my grey cardigan and stare at the church. The church, placed in the middle of nowhere, is made of wood with weathered white paint, topped with a weak steeple. It sits on patchy, half-dead grass and behind it stands a plethora of gravestones, some covered in moss, and some, like Will's, slowly drift from its pristine condition. In front of the estate, there's an empty parking lot with my bike toppled over, but further from that there are seemingly endless fields divided from the lot by a desolate road topped with a fly circling around roadkill. I look over at Jack and get a knot in my stomach.

"You remind me of Will." I pause for a second as he looks over at me. I look away, refusing eye contact, then have a moment of clarity. I still feel as if his eyes are on me but I know better than to look at his face again.

"How so?" he inquires. I wait a beat.

"You know." The feeling in my stomach strengthens.

I wait a minute before I say something I've been pushing aside: "Are you really even here?"

Silence.

I hop off the monkey bars and take my sweet time getting on my bike. I look over at the playground, sitting unoccupied. And I guess he wasn't even there to begin with. So, I bike down to my school where I retrieve the letters from an unused storage locker.

Collin Shiflett

Age: 15, Grade: 10

School Name: Appomattox Regional Governor's School, Chesterfield, VA

Educator: Gail Giewont

Category: Poetry

Fading Fun

Fog clears on a trapping town,
a gem to those who try to pass through.
Museums of wax boast impressive records
illuminated by the neon gas
flowing through loopy glass tubes.

Half red, half blue,
the screen shows a different existence.
A trick of the eyes and life
sits in your lap. Another quarter
spent on an experience forgotten.

A spinning wheel lifts participants
to new heights. A shelter of all glass
protects those who wish to sail higher
than the surrounding Smokies. A hypnotic disk,
a nightly fever dream of electric lights.

Scott Shockley

Age: 13, Grade: 8

School Name: Sabot at Stony Point, Richmond, VA

Educator: Sarah Lile

Category: Science Fiction & Fantasy

Sandsville Ghost Hunting Co.

Sandsville Ghost Hunting Co.

By: Scott Shockley

A pale, white creature passed through the wall behind me. I had to get to my friend. I scrambled through my pockets, trying to find the ghost chaser candle. Then, I realized, I forgot it in the car! I jumped over the countertop and hid behind it. But the ghost saw me! In a panic, I threw a glass cup at the ghost. And it passed right through its head smashing against the wall. ‘That’s gonna hurt my paycheck’ I thought as I ran into the kitchen. In the kitchen, I found a cabinet and hid in it. And I waited, and waited, and waited. About an hour later the door slowly opened and I desperately tried to throw a wooden spoon at the creature. And the spoon clonked against the head of my friend and coworker, Molly.

“Ouch!” she yelled.

“Sorry, I thought you were the ghost,” I said

“Stop trying to throw things at ghosts,” she said, “you know it won’t do anything to stop them.”

“Please don’t tell our boss,” I said.

“Just come with me to headquarters,” she said as she rolled her eyes.

That wasn’t the first time I tried to throw something at a ghost. The week before, I tried to throw a plate in Sandsville tavern and it hit my boss and broke against the floor. The tavern owner wasn’t happy about that. I always panic when I see ghosts and forget how to use my equipment. Anyway, my name is Sean Launderman and I am a 16-year-old ghost hunter in Sandsville, Maryland.

Ghost hunting is a fairly new industry, which started 3 years ago in 2025 when the ghost chaser candle was invented. The way the candle works is you light it and the ghost runs away from it. But, it never permanently works and the ghost always comes back. I think we needed to talk to the ghosts and find out why they aren’t going into the afterlife and cause chaos in this world.

Anyway, after the spoon incident, Molly and I went back to headquarters. Molly is my age, tall, and has dark brown hair. Just like me, she has a weekend job in the Sandsville ghost hunting company. She is a very quick thinker who can always keep calm under pressure. She is also very smart and knows how to identify exactly where a ghost is inside a room using clues as simple as the temperature of the area. Our boss always says she ‘thinks like a ghost’ since she seems to know a spirit’s every action including what they are going to do next. I am kind of the opposite of that, I can get extremely stressed and forget what I am doing completely. But I know the business of ghost hunting and know a lot about the studies of the paranormal. I am short, and I have brown hair with lots of freckles. When we went through the door the boss was waiting for us.

“Did you free the Sandsville tavern of spirits?” he asked. My boss is named Larry Letman but we have to call him Mr. Letman. He is also very tall and has long black hair. He left the University of Maryland a year ago where he studied paranormal sciences. He can also be very demanding and can get angry for no reason.

“Yeah for now,” Molly said.

“Why haven’t we tried to talk to the ghosts?” I asked. “There must be some reason they choose not to go to the afterlife.”

“Are you questioning the way we do things here!” Mr. Letman yelled.

“No! It’s just-”

“Shut up Sean!” he screamed. And then he stormed to his office.

“He’s a jerk,” Molly said.

“Tell me about it,” I responded.

Later that night, we were closing up the office. When an old, pale, man came through the door.

“The ghosts, they’re causing chaos in my in!” he said in a trembling voice. “They’re throwing things around,

scaring the guests! I'm trying to use a ghost chaser candle but they just go invisible and continue to cause trouble!"

"We'll get to it as soon as we can tomorrow," Molly said.

"You need to come tonight!" he said.

"We don't work after midnight," Molly responded. "It's already 12:30 A.M.

"I'll pay extra,"

Right after he said that the boss came running into the room.

"Did you say you'd pay extra!?" Mr. Letman asked.

"Yes," the man responded.

"You two," our boss said pointing at Molly and me, "Go chase the ghosts out of his inn!"

"How are we going to scare off multiple spirits with only 2 people?" I asked.

"I think this is a good chance to introduce my little sister Sandra," he said.

Right after he said that a girl that looked like she was in middle school came out from Mr. Letman's office.

"She looks a little young to be ghost hunting," Molly said.

"Yes, but she has potential," he said, "anyway go to the inn and free it from spirits!"

Sandra seemed very quiet. Molly and I debated whether or not we should take her in. We decided she might tell our boss that we left her out and we didn't want to see how our boss would react.

Later that night, we pulled in front of the inn. It looked a lot like an old house. It had white paint peeling off the side of the building and was made out of wood that had some water damage in the past. The roof was made out of black tiles and it looked like a few tiles were missing. The building was medium-sized with two stories. There was a crooked sign over the porch that read *Sandsville Inn: est. 1835*.

"Here we are," said the mysterious innkeeper, "The ghosts are mainly causing problems upstairs."

We walked in and immediately the inn had an eerie feel to it. All the furniture was Victorian, it was very dark, the floorboards creaked underneath us, and there were strange paintings on the walls.

The stairs shook as we walked up to them. I thought I heard whispering upstairs but I thought it was just my imagination. Then, right as we got to the top, a vase flew from down the hall and grazed off the top of my head, and then I heard the smash of the vase hitting the wall behind me.

"That was a close one!" I yelled.

I looked over and saw Molly light a ghost chaser candle. It flew out of her hand as if someone knocked it out. The lighted candle hit the ground. Suddenly, the carpet burst into flames.

"Everyone out of the inn!" the inn manager yelled.

Then, the ghosts locked all of the doors and windows.

Then, it was chaos. Children screaming, fires burning, tables and chairs being knocked over. We were no longer ghost hunters, we were a rescue squad.

Then someone behind picked up a vase and threw it against the window, and the window smashed open while all the guests ran out. Sandra came through and saved all of those guests! Now that all the guests were safe, Sandra grabbed the fire extinguisher and sprayed the foam on the fire, and it died down into a few hot ashes.

Suddenly, the mist formed in front of me into a giant cloud of fog. Slowly, the cloud started to form. A pale, white creature formed in front of me then three others formed behind it. The creatures had a human-like appearance and 2 of them looked to be adults and the other 2 looked like children. The creatures were wearing clothes that looked like they were from the early to mid 19th century. The spirits had no legs and all of them looked angry about something.

I didn't know what to do, we knew the ghost chaser candle wouldn't work. Molly and I frantically searched the house for something to use. Behind us, we heard the smashing of glasses and tables as the ghost continued to throw things around. It was way too dangerous to get close to the ghost. That's when I got an idea.

"Molly, one of the ghosts isn't chasing us," I said, "I don't think that it's evil. I think it wants to talk to us!"

"How are we supposed to talk to it though?" Molly asked.

"I don't know. Maybe he has a Spirit communicator," I replied

"A what?"

"A Spirit communicator. A new invention used for talking to ghosts."

"Okay. If you say so," she said.

Something in my mind told me there was one in the inn. I opened a lot of different closets and cabinets. I didn't exactly know what it looked like. Objects continued to get knocked over and thrown at us. A few hours later, we opened almost every door in the house.

"It's no use," Molly said.

"We gotta hide from them!!" I said.

"It's no use, the ghosts will pass through every wall in the house until they find us!" she replied

Then, one of the ghosts passed through the wall behind us. I screamed and crawled under a table and Molly tried to open the window, but the window wouldn't budge, the spirit locked it. But, the spirit didn't look like it wanted to

hurt us. The face looked hopeful like we knew what it wanted. The spirit slowly raised it's hand and pointed to a carpet. It went over and lifted the carpet for us to see a little door underneath it.

"Molly, we gotta help them," I said

"I still don't know if we should trust them," Molly responded.

"It might be our only option."

We both decided we should open the small door. The door looked like it was part of the floor. I grabbed the rusty handle and slowly pulled it open and a wave of dust hit me and that's when I saw it. A small black device with multiple buttons and switches, it had a little antenna at the top and the words on the side read *Spirit communicator*.

"How does it work?" Molly asked.

"I think you press the green button," I said. And just like that, the Spirit communicator turned on and the ghost started talking.

"Thank you for talking to me," the spirit said.

"No problem," I replied.

"My name is Robert Brooke and I wanted to tell you one thing," he said.

"And what's that?" Molly asked.

"My family died in this inn many years ago," he said, "I had a wife and 2 children, one daughter and one son. They all died from influenza the same week, in January 1867 and nobody remembers them. I was the only one who survived and was remembered. They are very angry, but they aren't evil. I ask you to do something so living beings remember who they are. And get out quickly!" and then he disappeared. Immediately after that, the rest of the family came in, looking angrier than before. And they lost it. Fragile pieces shattering all around us, pictures being knocked off the wall, and even a chair being thrown at us. The room was being torn as we desperately tried to think of something to do. Just then, Sandra knocked down the door and ran out of the inn with us.

"Don't worry they don't usually leave their area," Molly said, "Anyway let's go to the others."

Later that night we told the innkeeper what happened.

"I'm so glad I bought the Ghost Communicator, I couldn't figure out how it worked and forgot about it completely," he said. "Also, thanks for clearing the inn of spirits."

"I'm glad we could help," I said.

The next day I told the boss how to clear the ghosts. I also told him what Sandra did for us.

"Sorry for questioning you," he said. "I am so glad Sandra could help out! Thanks to you guys Sandsville ghost hunting Co. will be the best in the business!"

"Don't mention it," I responded.

A week later, I walked to the inn. There was a new plaque that read *The Brooke Family died 1867 in this inn* I smiled and continued walking. I am the one who found out how to hunt ghosts.

Anna Sleeker

Age: 13, Grade: 8

School Name: St Catherine's School, Richmond, VA

Educator: Julie Elmore

Category: Short Story

Not Just a Normal Girl

Not Just a Normal Girl

Before I turned thirteen, I was just a normal girl. I went to school in Charleston, had slumber parties with my friends, and stayed up late watching Netflix. But when I came home from school on my thirteenth birthday, my life changed.

"Carmalet Danes!" I heard my mom call as I walked in the front door on a sunny afternoon, "Your father and I want to share something with you!" I knew this must be big news since my mother never called me by my real name. I got excited and hoped that I would finally be getting the puppy I had always wanted. I threw down my bags and raced to the living room. When I got there, I saw my parents with serious, but happy faces seated on the couch next to each other.

"How was school, Cammy?" my father asked.

"It was good, but what's the big news? Am I finally getting a puppy?"

He chuckled and shook his head, "No, not quite."

Disappointed at his response, I heaved a great sigh. "Well, what is it then?"

"Your mother and I have always told you we are lawyers that work from home. Well, that isn't exactly true."

Confused, I asked, "What do you mean?"

"Let me show you. It will be easier to explain that way." Mom and Dad walked me into our basement. I never went down there because it was cold and filthy, and there was nothing to do. They took me to a power outlet on the wall behind the stairs, and Dad slid up the white protector and scanned his hand. As he took his hand off, the wall began to slide to the left and revealed a wooden door. By that point, I was completely confused. "Oh my gosh," I exclaimed, "What is this?"

"This," my mom responded, "is where your father and I work everyday while you are at school. All this time we have told you we are stay home lawyers. Actually, we are secret spy agents, and now that you are thirteen years old, you become one too."

I was speechless. "I'm a wh-what?"

"You, Carmalet Danes, are a secret spy agent. This is where your mother and I have worked for years, and you will now join us."

Amazed and confused at the same time, I asked, "How did I not know about this?"

"Everyone that works for the Spy Agency of America is sworn to secrecy. If you are an agent and get married, your spouse becomes an agent with you. Your children also become agents, but they are not allowed to know until their thirteenth birthday. Now that you are thirteen, Cammy, you are an agent that works for the Spy Agency of America, and you are sworn to secrecy."

"Wow," I said, "Now that is big news!" My parents laughed and I asked, "So, I can't even tell Jalyn?"

"It is imperative that you never ever tell Jalyn or anyone that you are a secret spy agent. That will blow your cover, and the agency's cover. I know it is really tempting, and that is why the agency waits until the child is thirteen. When you turn thirteen, you are capable of keeping the secret. Does that make sense, Cammy?"

"Um, sure. That makes sense!"

"Your dad and I will tell you when we are assigned to a case, and will help you read the file containing all the information you need. Besides staying up late sometimes to work on a case, and keeping a big secret, your life will continue on as normal!" my mom explained.

"Sounds exciting! I think I'm ready!" I said.

After the big news was revealed to me, our secret agent family sat down in the dining room for dinner and finished out my thirteenth birthday. That night, I fell asleep excited for the future and surprised I didn't know everything about my parents that I thought I knew.

The next day at school, Jalyn wasn't there. I was a little concerned because Jalyn never missed school, and when she did, she always texted me first. We always told each other everything and I thought I always knew what was going on in her life. I decided she wasn't feeling well and didn't text me because she didn't want me to worry. Trying to keep the spy secret, I kept my mouth shut for most of the day, and didn't talk to many people.

I usually walked home from school because I lived so close to school, but today was different. My homeroom teacher informed me that my parents called to pick me up at regular carpool. I didn't worry, and just suspected that it was supposed to rain that afternoon.

When it was time for carpool, it wasn't raining outside. I got into the car with my parents and asked them with concern on my face, "Why did you pick me up at regular carpool today?"

My parents looked at each other and said, "We have been assigned to your first case!"

Thrilled, I asked, "What is it?"

"Well, Cammy, it's not a fun case this time. Jalyn has gone missing."

"Missing!? How could my best friend go missing? No! It's not true. Tell me it's not true!"

"I am so sorry Cammy," my dad said sadly. "We have been assigned to this case, but you have to make the decision whether you want to take it or not. Do you think Jalyn can keep the secret?"

I thought about what this meant for my family. My parents' jobs would be in jeopardy because there was a possibility that Jalyn would find out about the secret. They could be fired. Then, I thought about Jalyn. She was my best friend, and I thought it was my duty to find her. With tears streaming down my face, I decided, "We are taking this case! My best friend has just gone missing! I know her best out of anyone, and we have to find her! I know there is risk that Jalyn could figure out who we are, but I know she can keep a secret!"

"I completely understand Cammy. I know this is hard on you, but Jalyn is strong and she will be fine. When we get home, we will read her file together, and start gathering evidence to find her. Cammy, don't worry. We will find your best friend," my mom promised me.

I took a deep breath and believed my mother, "Okay. We will find her."

At home, my parents and I sat down to read Jalyn's file. It said she was twelve years old, and provided a description about her. The file also gave details about where Jalyn was for the twenty four hours before she was reported missing. I found out her mother woke up that morning and saw that Jalyn was not in her bed. There was no note, no evidence, nothing. She had immediately called the police, who came to inspect the house.

Jalyn's mom was previously married, but got divorced a couple years prior. She got full custody over Jalyn, so Jalyn has only seen her dad a couple times over those years.

In big bold letters under the suspects column of the file was the name of Jalyn's cruel and crabby neighbor, *Garen Sooner*. The evidence showed that Garen was at his home the night before Jalyn went missing, but his car was gone and his house lights were off the next morning. It said that he hadn't returned all day.

"Well," I spoke up, "it must be him! We have to find him!"

"Not so fast Cammy! There is evidence that supports he is a prime suspect, but not enough to confirm he is with Jalyn," my mom responded.

"Fine, but where are the other suspects!"

"That is for you to figure out, Cammy."

I sighed and we continued reading Jalyn's file. As we read, we discovered that Jalyn's mother went to bed before Jalyn, and didn't actually see her daughter go to bed. My mother said that was key information because now we knew that Jalyn could have left the house on her own, and Garen may not have taken her. All of a sudden, I had a strange memory of Jalyn saying something to me about going out at night.

"Mom!" I said, "Jalyn could have gone to the park. I have a vague memory of her saying she sometimes likes to go to the park at night and get some fresh air. Maybe she went to the park and there could be evidence there of where she went next!"

My mom praised me, "That's perfect information, Cammy! We should go inspect the park and see if there are any clues there."

We hopped right into the car and drove to the neighborhood park. When we got there, everything seemed normal. Kids were playing and doing homework, adults were reading, and everyone was having fun. Then, I spotted something different by the large wood bench. I walked over and saw Jalyn's puffy blue coat sitting there!

"Mom! Dad!" I yelled toward my parents, "I found Jalyn's coat!"

My parents walked over and my dad whispered, "Shh, remember no one can know we are on a mission. We have to pretend we are here to enjoy the afternoon."

"Right," I said, feeling guilty.

"Cammy, that is a great clue," my mom added.

"What do we do with the clue now?"

"Well, now we have proof that Jalyn was here, but we still don't know where she went next. So, we have to

search for more clues telling us where she went. Try looking in the jacket,” my mom said.

I unzipped all of Jalyn’s coat pockets and a piece of notebook paper fell out of one of them. It only had her mom’s phone number written on it. Disappointed, I kept searching around the bench. Mom, Dad, and I searched around the park for about two hours, trying not to be suspicious. When we still didn’t find anything, we decided to head back home.

“We will assess the situation with all the clues we have when we get home, Cammy. Then tomorrow, we can search other places for more clues. Do not be discouraged!” My mom said and she stroked my long, blonde hair.

“Sounds great! What’s for dinner?” My dad asked as we all laughed.

“Cammy and I will walk to the market and then home to get some pizza for tonight. Does that sound good?” We all nodded in unison.

As mom and I walked through the neighborhoods on our way to the market, we passed by a strange house that looked as dull as a statue. It looked slightly different and duller than all the other houses on the street, and had a familiar looking purple bracelet sitting on the first step.

“Mom!” I exclaimed as I realized who the bracelet belonged to, “That is Jalyn’s bracelet! She wears it everyday!”

“Great clue, Cammy! We can ring the doorbell to see if Jalyn is here, and call your father to meet us here.”

I felt a little nervous as I walked up the dusty steps to ring the doorbell, but I gained the confidence I needed. The first time I rang there was no answer. I rang a second time and heard footsteps quietly walking toward the door. As I stared at the door, I saw an eye poking through the peephole and heard a faint, familiar voice that said, “Dad! It’s not mom. Can I open the door?” When the door opened, I saw Jalyn’s face staring at me in the doorway. We both gasped in surprise at the same time.

Unable to speak for a few moments, I finally said to my mom who was on the phone, “Mom. I just found Jalyn.” My mom turned and gasped when she saw Jalyn standing in the doorway.

Saying Jalyn’s name helped me comprehend what had just happened. I had just found my best friend. With relief and joy rushing through me, I sprinted over and hugged Jalyn saying, “We found you!”

“Cammy?” Jalyn questioned, “Why were you looking for me and how did you find me? Remember, I told you I wouldn’t be at school the day after your birthday.”

“What?” I was very confused. “I guess I didn’t hear you say that. You worried everyone! Why are you here and what are you doing?” Before Jalyn could respond, my dad pulled up and rushed out of the car.

“Jalyn!” he said, “What are you doing here?”

“Come inside,” she said, “I’ll explain everything to you.”

When we walked inside, I saw a familiar looking man sitting sadly on the old couch. The man was not Garen. Jalyn led us to the living room to sit down next to him, and she started to explain what had happened.

“As you all know,” she started, looking at her father, “my parents got divorced about two years ago. I haven’t seen my dad at all since the divorce and I missed him. I knew I couldn’t tell my mom that I was staying with my dad for the day, so I wrote a note to her saying I was at my friend Dannie’s house. I couldn’t tell her I was at your house because she knows your parents too well and it was your birthday yesterday. She would have asked about me. Did she not see the note?”

“No,” I responded.

“Oh no. She must have been scared to death! Okay, I’ll address that after I finish telling the story. So, I was just about to leave and walk back home when you rang the doorbell. I looked through the peephole and was so focused on making sure that you weren’t my mom, that I didn’t realize it was you!”

“Wow,” I said, “That is not the story I was expecting to hear!” We all laughed, except for Jalyn’s father. Jalyn noticed the nervous face on her dad and asked him what was wrong.

He questioned nervously, “Since you found us, does that mean Jalyn’s mom is going to find out that I’m with her?”

I looked at everyone and reassured him without hesitation, “No. We can keep this a secret.”

I could see his sigh of relief as a weight was lifted off his shoulder.

Suddenly, Jalyn piped up, “Wait! Why didn’t you just assume I was sick, Cammy? Since you forgot that I wasn’t going to be there the day after your birthday?”

My parents and I looked at each other and I decided it was okay for my identity to be discovered because I had just found my best friend, and I knew Jalyn could keep a secret. “Jalyn, I have a secret,” I started. “I know we always tell each other everything, but this is different. I am not supposed to tell you or anyone, but since I was assigned to find you, I can tell you.”

“Assigned?” she asked.

“Yes, Jalyn. My parents and I are secret spy agents.”

Her eyes bulged in surprise and I filled her in on all my secrets. I let her know that she and her father could never

tell anyone about the agency, or about my family and me, because we could be fired. I was relieved when they agreed to keep the secret.

After all the information was out, and Jalyn said goodbye to her father, I told my parents that I would walk Jalyn home. "We will tell Jalyn's mom about the note that she didn't see, and that Jalyn came over to my house to do homework after school," I said.

"Way to think like a true secret spy agent, Cammy," my parents congratulated me as my face lit up with happiness.

When we got back to Jalyn's home, we informed her mom about the note. She was relieved to see Jalyn and told her daughter to stick the note on her forehead next time! Jalyn and I said our goodbyes and I walked home.

From that day, I decided that I liked my new life. I realized I didn't know everything about everyone that I thought I knew, and that's okay. I was excited for the future, and I wanted to be the best secret spy agent that I could be.

Avery Spruill

Age: 13, Grade: 8

School Name: St Catherine's School, Richmond, VA

Educator: Julie Elmore

Category: Short Story

A Transparent Feeling

A Transparent Feeling

Part I

Gray, black, and white was her life every day. Every time someone sees Eleanore, they don't really see her. They see "blind girl." The thing is, she's not actually blind. Eleanore was diagnosed with achromatopsia when she was two months old. This is a very rare eye condition that gives someone the ability to see only shades of white, grey, and black. Every day when she gets out of bed, it's gray, black, white. Every time she goes outside, it's gray, black, white. Every day, it's grey, black, white. Her favorite season was winter because all everyone could see then was white, and maybe for the first time, she felt like she belonged with everyone. She could say things like "the snow is so white" or "Isn't the white snow pretty?" Even though Eleanore didn't have her colorful world, she still did regular things like shopping, going to school, and driving to places with her mom.

"Eleanore, would you drive me to the supermarket tomorrow?" her mom said.

"Sure thing Ma," Eleanore replied.

Eleanore's mom was named Shelly. Shelly had Eleanore when she was about eighteen years old, with the dad leaving them for college that made her a single mom. When Shelly found out that Eleanore was diagnosed with achromatopsia, she didn't have enough money to get her the right treatment, so Eleanore had to live with gray, black, and white for the rest of her life. As the years went by, every Christmas, Thanksgiving, or birthday she would wish for the special glasses that could help her see color, but every time she got something like socks or a knitted hat. She enjoyed her warm knitted clothes, but sometimes she wished that they had enough money to afford the glasses. What was the point in making colorful socks and hats if she couldn't even see the color, she thought? Why did her mom feel the need to get her fun and colorful stuffed animals if she couldn't tell the difference? It was because they had hope. Every day when Eleanore and her mom ate dinner and prayed before eating, they said the same prayer:

*Lord God, may we be grateful for our lot,
and compassionate toward all those who are
suffering every kind of distress at this
difficult time. May we hold back nothing, and
hasten to be the ministers of prayer and mercy,
like the disciples of Him who went about doing
good in times of need. May Eleanore always be
In hope of sight, and have her eyes guide her
to the light.*

The next morning Eleanore stepped outside and was in awe as she saw the white fluffy snow lying on top of the houses, and the chills that surrounded her made her feel somehow cozy. She and her mom stepped in the car and drove to the supermarket in the same old battered car they've had since Eleanore was five. Eleanore has driven in the snow all the time, but for some reason, it was especially icy and windy. "Honey, will you pass me my purse, please?" said her mom. As she finished the sentence, Eleanore had already gotten the purse and was grasping it in her hands. She picked it up, started to hand the purse to her mom, and it was a few seconds that it took for the car to flip into a series of barrel rolls along the side of the highway until they were upside down about fifteen feet from the road. The world went silent for a few minutes while Eleanore and her mom sat upside down in the car. Eleanore tried to call out to her mom, but all she could manage was a small mumble.

"Mo-m-om. Mom-oom," she tried to say, but nothing would come out that was understandable. She tried to sit up, but as she did so, a shot of pain went through her left leg, as if a thousand bullets were hitting her at the same time. She tried to get up again but the pain was unbearable, and just as she took a rest, her consciousness slowly slipped

away.

Part II

Eleanore opened her eyes to see darkness. Where was she? She couldn't remember. She tried to grasp those memories, but she just couldn't remember. It was as if they were only a couple of feet away and all she had to do was reach them, but she couldn't. Just as quickly as those memories had slipped away, they had come flooding back to her. The sounds of sirens and people yelling filled her head. "Get the gurney!" and "We're gonna have to lift it," she heard. At that moment, she felt a tug on her right shoulder. Pain exploded through her shoulder and all over her back. She quickly moved her head trying not to get scrapped by the metal now hanging from the roof of the car, and looked to see who was speaking. It was her mom. Her mom was standing outside of the car with a couple of scrapes on her face and a splint around her arm, but at least she looked okay. That was all Eleanore had to hear to send a shot of instant relief through her body.

After a few minutes went by, she couldn't really tell how long because all she could think about was the pain her legs were in, a man stepped up to her. "We are going to lift the car up and get you outta there, okay?" the man said.

Eleanore replied with a mumble of "I n-need t-t-to go home-ho-home."

"We are going to get you to the hospital and fix you up, then you can go home. We just need you to stay still so we can lift up the car. Got it?"

"Yes," Eleanore said. As she said that, the men assembled around the car and got ready to lift it up.

"One, two," they counted, "three!" Just then, the men lifted the car up and above Eleanore, and once the car was lifted, darkness took over Eleanore once again.

Part III

Pain everywhere, pain in her legs, in her back, on her head. Eleanore couldn't live with the pain. She was only awake for a few seconds when she saw her mom standing over her. She tried to speak, but she couldn't get the words out of her mouth. As much as she tried, her body seemed to not be her own anymore, and she couldn't move at all. Eleanore then fell back into unconsciousness in the ambulance.

How long had it been, Eleanore didn't know, but when she woke back up she was on a hospital trauma table with doctors surrounding every side of her. "Honey, you're awake," her mom said. Eleanore tried to speak but her mom told her not to. Eleanore tried to move but her body told her no. All Eleanore could do was to stay put and do nothing. For the fourth time, Eleanore was in darkness.

The last time she had woken up she was surrounded by doctors on a trauma table. This time, she was in a normal hospital bed, and next to her, one doctor. The doctor was a tall male with a white lab coat. That was all Eleanore could see, no eye color, no hair color, and no skin color. She could tell he had a lighter tint to his skin based on the shade of white, but she wasn't completely sure. "Hello, I'm Dr. Robins, head of the surgery center here at Providence Portland Medical Center. You have severe injuries to the left leg and your wrist, but we think with a few surgeries we'll be able to fix that up for you. Except, you suffered lots of damage to your spinal cord, and we might have to take you into surgery for that too. Just then, her mom walked into the room.

"I just took care of the paperwork, and everything's gonna be fine," she said.

"Mrs. Schurp, there was something we needed to discuss with you," the doctor said in a low quiet tone.

She replied, "sure." Dr. Robins and Eleanore's mom walked out of the room and into a conference room, leaving Eleanore to her bed.

"Mrs. Schurp, we understand you guys haven't been to the hospital in a long time since your daughter's condition was diagnosed. I just wanted to let you know, the medical research happening right now has provided special glasses that can make your daughter see color. The only thing is, your daughter needs spinal surgery if she's ever going to want to walk again. Your insurance only covers one procedure. Eleanore will have to choose whether or not to have the spinal surgery or to have the eyesight treatment." After the doctor had explained everything to Eleanore's mom, she gasped. "I will let you have a few moments to think about this," the doctor said. Once the doctor left, Mrs. Schurp burst into tears. She knew Eleanore would want to see color for the first time, but she couldn't live with the fact that her daughter would never be able to walk again. So, Mrs. Schurp decided for her. Eleanore was going to have the spinal surgery and that was that, no acceptions.

Eleanore's mom gathered herself together and left the room. Once she entered Eleanore's hospital room, Eleanore already knew, by the look in her eyes, that she had chosen which surgery she would have. Eleanore didn't want her mom controlling her life anymore. This was her decision, and she was gonna choose herself. "Mom, I want to choose my own surgery," she said.

"This isn't up for discussion. I will not have my daughter bound to a wheelchair for the rest of her life!" Eleanore was taken aback by that last sentence. Did her mom never understand how much Eleanore has lost without the ability to see color? All Eleanore had ever wanted to do since she was a child was to see a rainbow for the first time, go to an aquarium and look at all the colorful fish, or go to a mall and actually pick out clothes she liked. As she sat in the

bed going over her options, she finally made her choice.

Part IV

Eleanore couldn't tell whether it was the morphine or the feeling of being reborn that made her so energetic and happy, but the pain that once held her so tight was gone. She sat in her bed looking around, but she couldn't see anybody. She called out, but she couldn't form a word, just more of a mumble. Just then, her mom walked into the room. "Honey, how do you feel? Are you okay?" her mom asked.

"M-oom," she tried to say.

"Oh don't try to say anything, just nod your head if you can," her mom said. Eleanore nudged her head just enough to look like a nod.

A couple of days went by and Eleanore's mom had gone in and out of the room trying to balance payment, and keeping Eleanore company while she lied still in her bed. The doctors had told them they could go home in a couple of hours and Mrs. Schurp was trying to handle all the discharge papers for them to leave. It was soon time for the two to leave, and they got the stuff together from the past few nights. As Eleanore's mom opened the doors from the hospital, Eleanore felt like she was in a whole new world. Her mom pushed the wheelchair they borrowed from the hospital about a couple of steps until a doctor came up to them and said, "Okay Mrs. Schurp, we will start your physical therapy in about one week from tomorrow." Eleanore and her mom both nodded their heads and headed to the same old battered red car that they've had since Eleanore was five.

Campbell Sullivan

Age: 13, Grade: 8

School Name: St Catherine's School, Richmond, VA

Educator: Julie Elmore

Category: Short Story

Benefits of Hard Work

Benefits of Hard Work

As soon as the words came tumbling from my mouth, I realized I shouldn't have said anything. The silence in the room was deafening as everyone looked around, shocked, and confused. I ducked my head, embarrassed, as I stared outside at the breathtaking view of the many skyscrapers in New York City, including the Empire State building. I looked around the lush conference room, with the expensive plush seats and crystal chandelier. There was a long wooden table that was to die for, and the paintings on the walls looked like they were worth more than my apartment. The flowers on the center of the table were alive and looked healthy, with full blossoms and big petals. There were an assortment of colors, from pink to red to blue, and were probably shipped in from around the world. Everyone had a glass with freezing water, with exactly three perfectly square ice cubes in each. I could feel everyone's stares as I took a gulp of my ice-cold water, trying to calm down. My goodness, it felt like it was a 100 degrees in this conference room.

"And just how do you plan to modernize our company?" said my spiteful coworker, Sarah, sounding almost insulted at my idea. All eyes swiveled to me, and my palms were sweaty and I started breathing faster. My boss, Lilliana, looked like she was having the time of her life watching me nervously try to explain my ideas that everyone seemed to hate.

"Well, if our collections were updated to appeal to younger generations our income would certainly improve. We should also consider improving our website because everything is online now. Our store should be renovated and we should consider adding the newest technology to keep our company on top." I replied, trying to act more confident than I feel. The atmosphere was tense, and I tried to imagine what was going through their heads. Everyone had been here for at least ten years and everyone was older than me by many, many years. They just thought of me as a lowly newbie that my boss, Lilliana, only kept around for coffee and sandwich runs. I almost certainly shouldn't be talking at a meeting as important as this one. We were here to decide how to get more customers, and for some reason, everyone here found it appalling that we update our company. The only reason they don't want to modernize the company is that the founder of the company, Isabel Kingsley, died a couple of months ago. Apparently, she was really old fashioned, and no one wanted to think about moving on away from her style. I understand completely, but I also think that the only reason our company is going to attract more customers is if we make it different and modern.

"Well, then," says Lilliana, as she stands up and collects her things. She turns on her heel and as soon as she leaves, everyone starts talking. I know that they are talking about me and I know that Lilliana is incredibly upset with me. Isabel and Lilliana were best friends and Lilliana idolized Isabel, and when she died Lilliana was heartbroken. The idea of moving on from Isabel must be really painful for her, but it had to be done.

"Lilliana! Lilliana, wait!" I called down the long hallway. I try to catch up to her, but running in heels is a lot harder than it looks.

"What now, Sarah?" she says, swiveling around, a furious look on her face. "This day couldn't possibly get any worse."

"I'm sorry, but don't you think it's time to update our company? We are trying to attract more customers, and the only way to do that is to switch it up a little." I say, timidly taking steps toward her.

"Isabel would have hated that." Lilliana's face softens for a moment then it hardens again. "I have lots of work to do. Are you done yet? Your silly shenanigans are embarrassing. Now, I'd like a venti almond milk honey flat white with 2 shots of blonde espresso from Starbucks. In the next 10 minutes please. I'm so hungry I could eat a horse, so maybe you could pick up some lunch too?"

"10 minutes?" I say because surely she knows that it will take at least 45 minutes with traffic.

"Yes" she says, as she strides out of the room. I race to the double doors and try to order on my phone at the

same time, hoping that the traffic isn't bad.

"Is there anything else you'd like me to do?" I say as I grind my teeth, trying to keep all my anger in. I have been running around doing errands for her all morning, and I keep trying to remind myself why I am doing this.

I have loved Isabel's clothing since I was a little girl, and working at her company was my dream. I want to be a fashion designer one day, and as soon as I saw her collection and the building I immediately fell in love.

"Oh yes, there is something else you could do for me," Lilliana says, pulling me from my nostalgic thoughts. She takes her coffee cup and says, "Could you-oops!" Lilliana says this as she deliberately pours her coffee on my new top. "Sorry!" she says, sneering down at me.

"What did you just do?" I hiss, trying not to attract more attention than I already have as I ransack the nearest napkin dispenser and desperately try to blot the stain out of my expensive creme top.

"You aren't the right fit for this company. You need to leave." she says, as she examines her nails.

"I can't believe this." I say, racing to the nearest bathroom. I wet the whole front of my shirt with water and then soap and then water again before going under the hand dryer to dry it. I grab my phone from my purse and call my mom as I flop down on one of the lush chairs.

"Yes?" says the familiar voice of my mom.

"Mom, I can't do this anymore." It's all I get out before I start crying.

"Oh no, honey, what's wrong?" I can hear the concern in her voice and I sniffle, wanting to get the whole story out before I break down again.

"My boss, Lilliana, you remember her right? She spilled her coffee that I got her on my shirt! I have been running around, doing errands for her all day, and she just told me I had to leave!" I say, my voice trembling.

"You're fired?" She says, sounding confused.

"No, she can't really fire me because Isabel hired me. I only met Isabel once remember? I was so scared to talk to her, but after it happened I couldn't stop talking about it. Isabel's good friend, Matthew, who has taken over the company since she died, is the only one who can fire me."

"So you are upset because she spilled coffee on your shirt?" My mom asks gently.

"It was just so unnecessary! She is acting like a middle school brat, not a middle-aged woman!" I say, starting to get angry instead of sad.

"Maybe, maybe she feels threatened by you. I mean, if anyone is going to take over her position it is going to be you, and she probably doesn't like having to compete for her job. I mean, she has been there for what, 15 years? If they were thinking about firing her for you, of course she'd feel upset!" There was a long silence as I processed what my mom was telling me. Was that really it? Did Lilliana just feel threatened by me? No. No, that wasn't right. She has hated me for the longest time, it isn't that she feels threatened by me. Right?

"I guess. But the other thing is that I am just running coffee and lunch runs! I thought I'd be doing more than that when I came here, but I just feel so useless." I say, as I trace my finger over the pattern in the chair.

"Sometimes, you have to start from the bottom and work your way up. Just keep working hard and stay focused on your goals. And after all, coffee and lunch runs are very important too!" says my mom, with a chuckle that brings a smile to my face

"Yeah, I guess you're right. I have to go. Bye Mom." I say, feeling much better.

"Bye honey." she says, hanging up. I take a deep breath. I stand up and leave the bathroom and head to my desk, avoiding Lilliana. As soon as I'm at my desk, I set up a meeting with Matthew in a couple hours. While I'm waiting I design a new building, imagining the layout and color scheme and set up. I also sketch out new clothes for a new collection, and make bullet point lists of things to add to our old, outdated, website. Eventually, Matthew arrives in front of me. I looked at the time; it was 3:30. Wow, I couldn't believe two hours had already gone by.

"Hey-you said you wanted to meet with me?" he says, looking ready for whatever I'm about to throw his way.

"Yes...I have some new ideas for our company." I say, trying to stay calm. I'm now nervous that he is going to tell me to pack my stuff and find a different company to work at, just like Lilliana did. There was a silence as he examined my papers, and I couldn't tell if he was impressed or disappointed.

"Sarah...this is really good." he says, meeting my eyes.

"Really?" I say, sounding really surprised.

"Yeah. I definitely think that we should make some improvements in our company, starting with these. And, I think it would be great to have you promoted to my level in the company, that way you can really start helping out and directing people around like Lilliana." he says, with a grin on his face. I shudder, thinking of Lilliana, and he laughs.

"Promoted?" I ask, confused. "Where will Lilliana go?"

"She is going to France to expand the company there. I think that was the best fit for her. She is very excited to be there." he says, taking another look at my designs. I pray for the people in France-they don't know what is about to hit them.

10 Years Later

I step off the private jet, taking a deep breath in. I'm back in my hometown, New York City. I smile as I step on the runway, strutting towards the airport. Inside, I am greeted by a man in a suit with a sign that says my name. We hurry through the crowded airport before getting in a limo parked outside. He takes my bags and gently puts them in the trunk before sliding into the driver's seat and calling back to me "Are you ready to go miss?"

"Yes." I tell him, peering out the window. I have missed New York. About 30 minutes later, we pull up in front of my company. Many of my coworkers are waiting outside. I turn to the driver and say "Would you mind bringing my bags to my apartment?"

"Of course miss." he turns and hops back in the limo before speeding away. I stride pass the people screaming outside and when I get in, I am greeted by my many coworkers. The company has only grown over the past few years, and now we are taking people from all over the world.

"Aw thank you, thank you," I say as I took the flowers and gifts that everyone was handing me.

"We missed you miss!" Shouts one of my coworkers, though I can't really tell who. I smile, looking down and all of the gifts in my arms.

"You guys are too kind." More gifts are handed to me, and they start falling out of my arms. I hand them to the woman standing next to me.

"Do you mind helping me carry these up to my office?" I ask.

"Not at all miss." She replies, taking most of the gifts and putting them in her arms. We walk towards the elevator and just as we get there the elevator doors swing open. We step in the glass elevator, with some sort of relaxing music playing and I sigh.

"It's good to be home." I tell her, as I watch the buildings below get smaller and smaller from the elevator window.

"It's good to have you back." She says, fidgeting. "I, uh, wanted to tell you that you have always been my role model. I mean, I love your work. It's great. So good."

"Thank you." I say, beaming. I could tell she was nervous, and I knew how hard that must have been because I was in that very same position long ago with Isabel. "You remind me of myself, you know."

"Really?" She says, her eyes bugging out of her head. She looks shocked.

"Yes. I have some advice for you, if you would like it." I say as the elevator dings and the doors open.

"I would love some advice." We walk towards my office and I kick the door open with my foot, holding it for her. She sets down all my gifts gingerly on a table I have positioned by the door. I sprawl out in my chair, sighing happily. It had been a very long day.

"Work hard. Stay focused on yourself, and don't worry about what anyone else thinks or what they say to you. Think outside the box." I tell her. "This is advice I heard years ago from my mom. It was what got me here today." She smiles shyly and thanks me. I think,

Maybe, just maybe, she will be like me someday.

Ethan Tabassian

Age: 17, Grade: 11

School Name: Collegiate School, Richmond, VA

Educator: Mil Norman-Risch

Category: Personal Essay & Memoir

Holding Your Breath

Holding Your Breath

By Ethan Tabassian

Mommadella died last spring. Her real name was Bridget, and she was born in Mullingar, Ireland, in 1927. Working as a nurse, she met Poppadella, a carpenter, and her true love. Mommadella and Poppadella then moved to Derby, England, where they had my Mother and her 2 siblings. When my mom was 12, they moved again, this time to Little Rock, Arkansas. America was different, and it was difficult. She worked the night shift at the local hospital and was rarely able to spend time with her children. Although it was never easy, she kept herself grounded in her faith and her love for her husband. Soon her children moved out, and it was just her and Poppadella again. They remained in Little Rock until they both reached their nineties and until her death last spring.

This year, my mom got me a fish for my birthday. I have a horrible track record with fish. None of my fish have lived very long. A few summers ago, I set up a koi pond in my backyard. Over the preceding weeks, raccoons managed to fish out all 3 of our koi. This time I was determined to keep my fish alive. My mom got me an Oranda Goldfish, which are characterized by a large squishy mass on top of their head. After a long time deliberating, I decided to name my new fish Loaf. While most goldfish are orange, Loaf was golden and would shimmer in the light. They say goldfish don't have good memories, but Loaf remembered me. No goldfish on Earth was spoiled like Loaf. Over the next few months, Loaf and I bonded and became best friends.

Last month, Loaf and I won The Flame's photography competition. One night I took a photo of Loaf while he was eating his food pellets. I then edited the photo until it looked like a professional photographer had taken it in a studio. When the competition was announced the next day, I submitted the photoshopped image to The Flame. Even though The Flame prohibited any form of editing or photoshop, Loaf managed to go unnoticed and was announced as the winner.

Diogenes of Sinope was a Greek philosopher born in 404 B.C.E. Upon learning about him in the fall of 2019; he immediately piqued my interest. Diogenes, one of the great minds of his time, was a cynic. Cynicism is the belief that all people are motivated by self-interest and that people should reject luxury and operate with more self-control. It wasn't Diogenes' philosophy that was fascinating to me, but his humor and the stories about his life that I became obsessed with. Diogenes lived by his beliefs to the extreme. His only possession was a wooden cup, he begged for a living, and he lived in a large barrel. Diogenes grew in popularity throughout the Mediterranean and was "acquainted" with Plato. One day, Diogenes saw a Child drinking from a fountain from his hands. Diogenes decided that his only possession, his wooden cup, was now useless. From then on, Diogenes drank and ate from his hands, claiming, "A child has beaten me at the plainness of living."

Early in his life, Diogenes worked as a money-changer in Sinope with his father. Diogenes was happy and was making a good living, but he soon lost it all. He was exiled from Sinope for attempting to "deface the currency." From there, Diogenes found himself in Athens. Here, he studied under Antisthenes, the father of cynicism. Diogenes began to write and give lectures about the teachings of Antisthenes. Diogenes was soon practicing exactly what he preached, moving into a barrel and giving all of his possessions away. Often mistaken for a homeless lunatic, Diogenes' teachings became extremely popular. His beliefs became so well-known that even Alexander the Great became a fan. Some historians believe that Diogenes was captured by pirates and sold into slavery later in his life. Diogenes, while being auctioned off, pointed at a man and proclaimed, "Sell me to that man; for he wants a master."

That man listened and purchased Diogenes, who became a teacher for the man's children until he died in 320 B.C.E.

Della comes from the Irish word for love and became my Grandmother's nickname when she was a child. It stuck with her for her entire life, and later it became Mommadella and spread to my Grandfather, Poppadella. In post-war Ireland, most people lived in poverty, and meals were few and far between. My favorite story from Mommadella's childhood was of Toby the pig. Toby was the runt of the litter, and a young Della begged her father to keep the piglet. From then on, she took care of the pig every day, she adored the pig, and the pig adored her back. Toby was more like a dog than a pig; he would follow Della wherever she would go and would come to her when she called. Every day, at 4 o'clock, Toby would run down to the street and greet Della when she returned from school. By now, Toby was 4 years old and was having a great life by a pig's standards. One day, Della returned from school, and Toby wasn't there. When Della walked inside, she found Toby being prepared for dinner. Mommadella insisted that his butchering didn't bother her. Della understood that Toby's death was an eventuality and a necessity, so she enjoyed her supper that night.

Plato and Diogenes did not get along. Plato described Diogenes in one of his texts as, "A Socrates gone mad." From this point on, he would attend Plato's lectures to heckle and abuse him. Plato once attempted to define a human in the simplest way possible. Plato came up with: "a featherless biped." Diogenes then traveled to Plato's Academy armed with a chicken with all of its feathers plucked. He shouted, "Behold, Plato's human being!" and threw the bald chicken onto the floor. Plato, tired of being pushed around by his peer, decided that he would fight back. This time, Plato interrupted one of Diogenes' speeches. Plato declared that the logic Diogenes used to justify cynicism was equal to that of a dog. Diogenes reacted by getting on all fours, cocking his leg, and urinating on Plato.

Alexander the Great also shared a famous interaction with Diogenes and was enamored by the philosopher's intelligence and wittiness. At this point, Alexander the Great was the most powerful person in the world. He decided that he wanted to meet his idol and traveled to Athens to see Diogenes himself. Once he reached Athens, he found Diogenes lying in the sun. Alexander the Great asked Diogenes if he had any requests that he could fulfill for him. Diogenes replied, "Yes, get out of my sunlight." Alexander responded, "Had I not been Alexander, I would wish to be Diogenes." Diogenes retorted, "If I were not Diogenes, I would wish to be Diogenes too."

As she got older, Mommadella developed Alzheimer's. It started with little things, like forgetting what day of the week it was or mixing my brother and mine's name up. Every time I visited, her memory got a little bit worse. Eventually, it got to the point where she would forget where she is and who she is. When it got dark, she would get angry and confused. Being around her was no longer fun. It was scary to see someone you love like this, and it was easier not to see her and ignore the problem. Mommadella was gone, and someone else had replaced her. Usually, when my mom, brother, and I visited, the house would be filled with Uncles, Aunts, and Cousins. Now relatives would visit less, and when they did visit, they didn't stay for long. Her small house would feel empty without everyone laughing and bustling around. Now it was quiet; it was only us, Poppadella, and what was left of Mommadella.

This week was the first real week of winter, the grass would now be frosted in the mornings, and the heat would take 5 minutes to warm up the car. Exams were done, and it was time for our annual trip to Little Rock to see our family. This was my first Christmas without Mommadella and my Grandfather's first since they were married 62 years ago.

Yesterday, when I got home from my last exam, Loaf was floating at the top of his fish tank. He wasn't dead, but he was barely alive. Instead of packing up for my flight the next day, I researched diseases and cures for sick goldfish. According to fish experts on the internet, feeding Loaf peas would cure him. That night I didn't sleep and would get up every 30 minutes to check on him. The next morning he was even worse. After speaking to a veterinarian on the phone, he concluded that Loaf had dropsy, which is almost always fatal in goldfish. With a flight to catch later that day, there was almost no way that Loaf would be alive when I returned. There was nothing left to do other than hope that the veterinarian was wrong.

When Mommadella died, I was sad, but I didn't cry. The rest of my family cried, but I didn't. My Mother mourned, and so did I. Not because I felt a deep emptiness because of my Grandmother's death, but because I felt like it was expected of me. This made me feel guilty; I was more guilty than I was sad. When it was time for her funeral, I didn't travel to Little Rock with my Mom. Instead, I stayed at home, pretending to mourn. I convinced myself I didn't process Mommadella's death and that soon I would feel depressed and cry. Now more than 6 months have passed, and it was clear that I processed Mommadella's death years ago, when she started forgetting who she was.

Everyone was miserable in Little Rock. It had been a while since Mommadella's death, and her absence was felt. There was tension in the air, and even when the house was full of people, it was quiet. When Mommadella was suffering from Alzheimer's, the only time she seemed like herself was when she was beside Poppadella. They were one and the same, and they were the happiest people I had ever met. Poppadella, without her, was a different person. Seeing my Grandfather like this was miserable. Poppadella rarely talked now, and a few times a day, he would start sobbing in a bout of mourning and remembrance for his wife. It is impossible to cheer someone up when you are sad, too, so we were depressed together.

My Dad, an ophthalmologist, offered to come by the house twice a day to feed and check on Loaf. At this point, Loaf had stopped eating and didn't react to anything. He was floating between life and death, and I was 1,000 miles away. Christmas was in 3 days, and I rarely left my room, too scared to see Poppadella and too scared that Loaf would die. I was spending hours a day on my computer researching cures and remedies for sick fish. Eventually, I stumbled on a video of a veterinarian doing surgery on a fish with similar symptoms. The vet documented the entire surgery and treatment process in a do-it-yourself style video. I sent the video to my Dad, and he agreed to perform the emergency fish surgery the next day.

The surgery didn't work, and Loaf died on Christmas eve. I cried and mourned the entire day.

Diogenes was disgusted by society. He did not understand why people would so easily accept the boundaries that society confined them within. Diogenes saw society as something constructed by humans that's sole purpose was to hold them back. Diogenes did not abide by any customs or taboos and would often defecate and masturbate in public. According to him, he was performing necessary bodily functions, which shouldn't be frowned upon. Diogenes believed that manners and traditions, as simple as greetings, mourning, and compliments, were all methods for hiding and repenting for humans' true nature. It was common to see Diogenes roam through the marketplace with a lantern. He would hold the lantern up to a random passerby and claim that he was looking for a "true human being." Although he was almost always criticizing and insulting Athens's people, he was beloved and seen as a hero.

Christmas day was surprisingly normal. I missed Loaf, and I missed Mommadella, but I wasn't sad. Relatives came over, we had dinner, and we exchanged gifts. For the most part, we were happy. For the first time, the memories of Mommadella weren't met with sadness. That night people shared their favorite memories of Mommadella, and for the first time, I cried over her death. They weren't sad tears, and they weren't happy tears. For the first time since her death, I was content. I was grateful for Poppadella. I was grateful for Loaf. I was grateful for my selfless father, and I was grateful that I knew Mommadella.

When Mommadella died, I held my breath. I wanted to grieve, and I wanted to mourn, but instead, I bottled up my feelings. When I saw Poppadella for the first time since her death, and when Loaf died, I finally exhaled. I no longer felt guilty, and I was finally at peace.

Many historians disagree over Diogenes' death. While it is known that he lived to the age of 89, his cause of death remains a mystery. The most probable and widely accepted cause of death was old age. Some suggest that he died from an infected dog bite or food poisoning from a raw octopus. Contrary to these beliefs, Diogenes' contemporary philosophers had a different account of his death. They claimed that Diogenes lived how he wanted, and he died how he wanted. They state that Diogenes held his breath, until he used up all the air in his lungs, and died.

Amanda Tan

Age: 16, Grade: 11

School Name: Collegiate School, Richmond, VA

Educators: Pete Follansbee, Jere Williams

Category: Science Fiction & Fantasy

(Humanity's) Future

(Humanity's) Future - A Collection of Journal Entries

Journal Entry 1

12/27/2055

I've begun to write this as I notice the changes happening to our society. Everything is developing faster than I ever could have imagined and I felt the need to document what's happening. As I have walked the streets over the years, I've noticed everyone becoming more immersed in technology. It's hard to find a face that isn't lit by the dim glow of a screen. But that was only the start. The younger generation was intent on the future and creating a better life for their children. Climate change was a global concern. Using "was" has somehow become appropriate now, because, with new technology programs, carbon emissions have been reduced. Many factories have begun to develop robots that carry out the job without the need for rest and injuries. New possibilities have been discovered such as harnessing thermal energy already trapped by the atmosphere and restoring glaciers. With the unstoppable development of increasingly advanced software, job opportunities have surprisingly increased. I suppose machine learning hasn't evolved enough for other jobs to be replaced yet. With widespread technology becoming normalized, life expectancy has increased within the last ten years. New advances in healthcare such as nanobot injections and bioprinting of organs could lead to faster diagnostics and treatment. Gene editing and research surrounding genome mapping have grown faster than anyone could have predicted. Today, they're genetically modifying a sheep so her children won't have hereditary chondrodysplasia, a musculoskeletal disease affecting lambs. Who knows how far we are capable of going and what the future holds? With the rise of artificial intelligence unhindered by anything but moral questions, the possibilities seem endless. Interestingly enough, much to the collective surprise of the nation, political tensions seem relaxed for the first time in years. Technology appears to offer a solution to any problem...

The partisan divide has faded over the last forty years as a new Progressive Party preaches the beneficial effects technology will have on the children of tomorrow and how it will revolutionize the world for the better by allowing humanity to focus its energy on stopping climate change and providing outstanding healthcare and career opportunities. It's gained support over the years and shows no signs of slowing down. I wouldn't have thought any of this would be possible when I was a teenager. Despite this rapid acceleration, no one seems to be addressing the moral issues... Those who question the work of scientists and programmers become the prey of a generation who only sees a future fused with technology. I just hope our naivety doesn't return to hurt us later.

Journal Entry 2

3/14/2060

I know I haven't written in a while. It's been a few years. I'm sorry. Perhaps I've just been caught up in the whirlwind of life. I was relocated several times as the tech industry expanded and work has been tiresome despite sitting in front of a screen all day. Though I suppose now it's more a whirlwind of data and new information. Ever since the success of the sheep experiment five years ago, gene editing and germline genetic engineering have somehow become the norm. Hereditary diseases like sickle cell anemia and Alzheimer's have the possibility of slowly being eliminated. The Progressive Party has already been emphasizing the costs this could save the healthcare industry as a whole. With the widespread growth and success of germline genetic engineering, it has become a more viable option for many families. There are still many unknowns as people fear the use of such a powerful technology falling into the wrong hands. Their beliefs are grounded in a truth that many are all too willing to overlook in pursuit of a favorable future with technology. Organ donors also seem to be in short supply lately, as the biomedical engineering company, ReplicAI, has partnered with a nonprofit through UNOS to donate and supply organs to patients who need a transplant. Robotic surgery is being developed to harvest organs and reduce the need for

doctors to travel. It's incredible how fast the medical field has adapted. Our nation is healthier than ever and the economy has steadily improved.

The effects of reversing climate change are starting to reveal themselves. Species are steadily being removed from the endangered species list and the number of tropical storms has decreased by 50%. Glaciers are back to their state during the Ice Age and carbon emissions are virtually nonexistent with the harnessing of biofuel and hydropower. We seem to have taken a turn for the better. However, while nature is thriving, I have noticed that the inevitable conversation of morals and technology is coming to fruition. It's an argument that each side has developed for years. It has to happen soon, though it is still hard to tell when. Machine learning and the adaptability of artificial intelligence have brought concerns. Some jobs such as factory workers, waitresses, and hotel workers are increasingly replaced by robots who are equipped with the skills and do not require rest and have virtually non-existent insurance unless there is company liability. However, it seems that our creative nature has allowed for most professions to flourish. The possibility of a robot truly being able to replicate the very essence of what it means to be human and conscious seems stifled by our arrogant belief that there will always be a place for our kind.

So far, there's little research about the human qualities that could possibly appear when AI further develops. Perhaps we will soon realize the implications of our creation? However, as of now, it appears that we are a mostly united front that sees a future laden with rapid development that shows no signs of stopping. The only question that remains... At what point will we realize that we should have slowed down and stopped to think about what the future might not hold?

Journal Entry 3

6/21/2067

Control. We thought we had it, but it appears to be slipping out of our grasp. Our flaws are being slowly exposed as we can barely keep up with the revolution around us whose onslaught was brought by us. While we believed we could program AI to the extent to which we wanted it to develop, machine learning proved far too strong a feat for us to conquer. Careers such as architects and psychologists have been dwindling in popularity and success as AI pushes its boundaries and continues to grow. There seems to be no limit to the way AI is adapting. Expertly run computer programs work tirelessly to design floor plans of housing. Each measurement is precise, each design is flawless, leaving no room for human error. At first, we doubted if a house designed by a machine could possibly replicate the feel of an architect. But quickly, AI became our primary resource for developing architecture. I watched as those around me succumbed to the power and grace of technology. Counseling and therapy proved more difficult for AI to adapt to. As humans, we crave connection and understanding with those around us. Instead of being our support system, new technology was able to replicate the feeling of a support system through biological stimulation. We felt as if we were conversing with something real when in reality, we were conversing with our own minds. Though cumbersome, perhaps we have created a false human connection. Baffled, scientists have decided to either let the technology run its course or try to stop it.

The divide is growing. We haven't reached the climax but I can feel the stress. Companies such as ReplicAI are only capitalizing on the profit they continue to earn from each new undertaking. Wealthy business owners have personalized research and hide between the ideals of the society we once created believing it had the answer to our problems. However, the health of the nation is hopeful. Medical advancements have bolstered our lifespan and immortality is becoming a possibility. Trackers in the blood detect disease before it even begins and the rise in robotic surgery and treatment options have minimized treatment time. However, the sword we wield is double-edged. Germline genetic engineering is increasingly used for cosmetic purposes. Ultra wealthy families have fitted their children with desirable traits that only reinforce the societal standards we have worked so hard to break down. Superficial beauty and materialism run rampant. We are no longer captivated by personality, but by appearance. Their influence dominates the political sphere as the Progressive Party becomes increasingly privatized. I fear that we have overlooked the moral questions we were so desperate to put off as our creation came to fruition. But now it seems to be almost too late. Many have begun to doubt our progress.

We have created technology that seems devoid of human error yet full of it at the same time. Jobs have begun to disappear along with the blossoming fear that this is only the beginning. Our nation is beginning to doubt the ambitious trust in technology that has held our society up for the past few decades. This wasn't the future we had imagined for ourselves. We believed in our creation and so we nurtured it and let it grow, but we were too eager and too fast, and now there is no turning back.

Journal Entry 4

2/9/2072

We're all lost. That's it. There's been a creation of what is now considered the "Useless Class." It pains me to say the words out loud, but from the moment machine-learning matured beyond our control, I think we instinctively knew

that we would no longer stand a chance. As technology grew, the timeframe for development drastically shortened and we couldn't have predicted how it was too much for us. We're being left behind. Unemployment skyrocketed with the influx of new robots, each more advanced than the last. Soon, germline genetic engineering became the norm and even the expectation. Research has come to a halt with many advanced programs researching for themselves with humanity pitifully playing catch-up. Society is split down the middle with little hope for reconciliation of the divide. The "Useless Class" has separated from mainstream society, though one could argue now that they are mainstream society. City streets are lined with skyscraper apartments. The rent is cheap and many stay in the comfort of their homes, absorbed by their only resource: a glowing screen. The wealthy flocked to the countryside with their technology in tow hoping to create refined communities crafted with the newest technology.

The doubts surrounding the rapid development of AI couldn't be quelled, but it was too late by the time anyone fully understood the repercussions. Those who doubted rarely gained a listening ear. Soon people were searching for any work they could find despite not meeting the qualifications. Artificial food was grown in labs through the culturing of cells, so hunger pains were the least of our worries. As the class of powerfully rich and wealthy became minuscule and elite, the unemployed received their "leftovers." Technology that failed to meet their exact needs was discarded and tossed away for anyone deemed "useless" enough to find. Failed experiments and broken parts were used to repair and create barely functional robots for the "Useless Class". Artificial intelligence and the future seem only to be in the hands of a small group of people. There is no middle class. The newest advancements and luxuries exist in the hands of the genetically perfect, believed to be the embodiment of beauty itself, whereas the "Useless Class" have separated and sustained themselves in a world seemingly devoid of anything technologically valuable. As the wealthy enjoy their isolated communities upon hills built of metal, the unemployed are left scraping by in the city with crude resources and improvised AI. The only way for them to rebuild is to start fresh and if that means wiping the slate clean, they have. The elite frown upon their actions and the creations and modifications they have made to robots and AI alike using their limited materials but the wealthy have become too distant to even understand their reasons. They have begun to fuse themselves with AI. Soon they will not be fully human.

Immortality is praised; natural death is a rarity. The killing of a less-than-perfect child is the embodiment of population control. As the elite continue to grow, so do their ambitions. Discussions of exploring the universe and discovering a larger planet to inhabit will become our next quest. The next step for humanity. We are so close to having it all. But the elite forgot the existence of the "Useless Class" and they, in turn, forgot the existence of the elite. The divide was irreparable and perhaps there is no solution and won't ever be one. We have lost ourselves and moved in opposite directions. It's ironic how the very thing we thought could keep us together has devastatingly split us apart. It seems as though everything has thrived except for humanity. Nature is purer than ever. There is clean water and also sufficient nutrients for the planet. Life has flourished. Technology can think for itself and is the path to a brighter horizon, just not one where we might ever seek inner peace. Perhaps we are haunted by the turmoil we have created but do not understand how to begin to stop it. We became what we never wished to be and didn't even see it coming. Where do we go from here?

Journal Entry 5
10/3/2075

The unimaginable happened. The divide healed. It was impossible, we all thought. But even more impossible, were the very "hands" that brought us together again. Amid our aspirations, despite how different they were, we hadn't even begun to consider the motivation of our creation. Eventually, the elite no longer lauded their creation, because they were their creation. Robots, alongside superhuman advisors, ran the government. Perfectly programmed laws were passed, and artificial intelligence, which knew what was better for us than we did, forced us together again. We threw our trust behind Dataism, the belief that technology was the future, and unstoppable. We were forced to rebuild but couldn't put our faith within ourselves, instead choosing the artificial intelligence already pervading our society. Anything to make humankind feel whole again. But at what cost? We've sacrificed our freedom, our love, our passion. It doesn't exist within us, but instead, we've poured it into our creation without leaving any for ourselves. I fear the empathy we once had for each other has slowly trickled into the "hearts" of our machines. What should we have done? It was too late by the time we truly realized. But our kind was young and naive and pushed past the inevitable moral questions we couldn't fathom to answer when they would have only repressed our future.

We failed to set boundaries and stumbled along believing we could make up for a lack of them. Our regrets only held us back so we chose to look forward and see the future. But I hope now that we realize the past could have warned us. We just didn't let it. I see our mistakes in our own eyes, eyes so glazed over they appear to have ceased to exist. We have no choices, nowhere to go from here. I'm not sure how we can right the narrative of morality as AI continues to surpass us in every way. There is no longer a path to seize back the characteristics of humanity; the line has become muddled between technology and ourselves. As I stare into our eyes, I see nothing but the blank cast of defeat. What do we do when our time is over? How do we tell our children about the world we live in? There is

nothing to refute, as we brought this upon ourselves. We're healthier than ever, we live forever, and we're astoundingly saddened and satisfied simultaneously.

We have everything and yet nothing at all. And I still wonder, could our technology be so beyond our imagination that we have to personify its qualities to understand it? We may call it a brain but it's likely more complex than that, an interwoven network of connections beyond our comprehension that we struggle to define. If so, I don't believe we will ever grasp the weight of our creation.

Amanda Tan

Age: 16, Grade: 11

School Name: Collegiate School, Richmond, VA

Educator: Pete Follansbee

Category: Poetry

It's Fall./Harboring Humidity

It's fall.

Cool breezes, crackling leaves.
Snuggled under the covers.
Scents of spice in the air.

A time when I still had you.
Your laugh and gentle words.
Warm hugs on my darkest days.
You took my hand,
Whispered in my ear.

The busy days, long nights,
Spent hunched over my desk;
Papers blurred by tears
That threaten to spill with each breath.

Crawling under the blankets,
A reprieve from the restless cycle,
I could escape into your arms.

Lit by the dim glow of warm lights,
Your hands around my waist.
My head on your chest.

You carried me away
To the comfort of familiarity;
I was home again.

A little girl, jumping in the leaves
Frosty wind against my small pink cheeks,
Swirls of steam curl upward
From my mug of cocoa.

You pull me back.
The sound of your voice;
I melt into your warmth.

But this year,
There's nothing to break the fall.

Pantoum: Harboring Humidity

Sickly sweet summer.
The yawning sun's whisper.
Bitter, cool lemonade.
Innocent pink sunglasses.

The yawning sun's whisper.
Dripping pool-soaked strands.
Innocent pink sunglasses
Peering wide-eyed into the light.

Dripping pool-soaked strands.
Soft toweled shadows.
Peering wide-eyed into the light.
Rays blind timid gazes.

Soft toweled shadows.
Fingertips pressed into the heat.
Rays blind timid gazes
Splashed by swift breezes.

Fingertips pressed into the heat.
Sickly sweet lemonade.
Splashed by swift breezes;
Bitter, cool summer melting.

Mia Tan

Age: 16, Grade: 11

School Name: Mills Godwin High School, Richmond, VA

Educator: Christine Maddox

Category: Poetry

When Reading a Poem

When Reading a Poem

At first glance,
As one hovers a magnifying glass over the foreign ink,
The poem may lean forward from its page
And extend an arm to help the reader cross the lanes of its lines.
It is an envelope begging to be opened
And a mirror inviting its audience
To observe what is behind them.

Its title is a cliff that one leaps off willingly,
For the thrill of having no control,
While its secrets blossom under a downpour,
Daring critics to examine every flaw.

The poem quells.
It caresses the mind like morning mist,
Only to whisk the heart into a frenzy of untamed flame.
Then it settles with a promise,
With the undertone of a laugh,
Just before the reader becomes hopelessly lost in its folds.

Glancing back,
The poet never held reins to the poem,
As forced meaning is futile.
Unveiling the seas of script is a power
Given solely to the ever-changing eyes of the world—
Eyes that may close in order to see
That perhaps a poem exists,
Not to perform a solo on stage
Or to elbow its way through a crowd,
But simply to gaze past the horizon of understanding
And breathe beside the reader.

Riley Torrence

Age: 13, Grade: 8

School Name: St Catherine's School, Richmond, VA

Educator: Julie Elmore

Category: Short Story

The White Room

The White Room

I drove past the old church that I had passed a thousand times before. I had been to so many carnivals there and had gone there almost every Sunday with my parents. But strangely this time felt different. I didn't know what it was. Maybe it was the fact that it was one of the last times I would pass by this iconic part of my childhood. It seemed different in a way I just didn't know-how. I had moved here when I was in seventh grade. My dad had just gotten a new job. I didn't like it here at first until I met Sally. Sally was my first friend here.

I kept driving until I got to the old rundown, now faded, blue shack that I called home. I drove up the gravel driveway lined with trees. As I drove up in my old beatdown gray SUV I saw my little sisters, Annie and Mabel, running up to greet me.

I pulled in right next to my dad's new dark blue Ford pickup truck. I got out and was immediately engulfed with hugs from Annie and Mabel. A few minutes later I'm sitting at a table with my mother talking about all the things that had happened while I was away at college. It had been a few minutes of silence when she finally asked if I was sure that I wanted to move to Chicago to be a nurse.

I reassured her that this is what I wanted to do. Even though she was reluctant to believe me she eventually did. I got up and started to walk out.

"Bella, where are you going?" she called after me.

"I'm going to see Teddy and Louis," I quickly responded. I stepped out onto our old white porch and waved to my friend, Sally, who was driving down my driveway. I stepped off my porch and got into her navy blue Ford freestyle.

We drove to the ice cream parlor to meet Teddy and Louis. Sally and I walked up to where the boys were standing. Sally practically ran into Louis's arms as I awkwardly hugged Teddy. Sally and Louis have been dating since 11th grade and Teddy and I were high school sweethearts until we broke up when I went to college in Seattle. Since then I have moved on and met someone new. Teddy and I were still good friends though. After an awkward exchange, we all ordered and sat down at a picnic table nearby. It was the usual conversation like how college was going and what we all planned to do next year. After a few minutes, Teddy nudged Louis's arm and after a little grunt, Louis asked if we wanted to come to a party that he was throwing since his parents were out of town visiting his older sister. Sally immediately said yes, she was always up to the party. I reluctantly said yes after Sally said that she thought that it would be great for me to see all my old friends again.

Sally and I headed back to her house to get ready for the party. After I showered and got dressed, we left to go to Louis's house. Sally and I got there around 7:30. We walked up to Louis's peeling white front door. Sally slowly pushed the door open, it creaked slightly but eventually gave away and swung open. It was much too quiet for one of Louis's normal parties. But Sally insisted that we were just early and walked inside. After a few minutes of waiting more people did come. After all the people came it suddenly got very quiet again. I didn't know what was happening but I thought that it was better to be safe than sorry. So I slowly maneuvered through the large groups of people to find Sally. I walked to where I saw her last, talking to a group of people by the stairs.

I asked the group if they had seen Sally. They said that Louis came over and grabbed her hand and led her upstairs and that was the last time they saw her. I knew that this wasn't unlike Sally to be off somewhere else talking to someone but something felt off. So I quickly walked up the stairs to find no one in the first two rooms. There was a short hallway with a door at the end of the room. I walked down the hallway with an uneasy feeling in my stomach. I twisted the door handle. The handle looked brand new but it sounded like it was leftover from when the house was originally built. I walked into the congested, dusty room. There were boxes everywhere and old furniture that looked like it used to be Louis's older sisters' old stuff. I started peering around the boxes for Sally but didn't see anything. By this time I had just noticed that I couldn't hear the music from the party anymore, I heard something

creeping to the left of me. I thought that it had to be Sally and Louis. So I made my way over to the sound. The air suddenly got very cold and heavy and there was a smell of blood. I looked over a box to see Sally's dead body in a pool of blood. I started to scream but no sound came out. I started to run towards the door but it slammed shut. There stood a shadowy figure holding a gun. The next thing I knew I was passed out on the floor surrounded by blood.

I woke up feeling dizzy and weak. I slowly pull myself up onto my forearms. I look around me to see where I am. I'm in a small room that looks more like a cage. There are bars on one side of the room with pretty much nothing else besides a small thin mattress on the floor that looks like it was made for someone much shorter than me. I try to stand up but am stopped almost immediately by a sharp stabbing pain on the left side of my side. I place my hand where the pain is and my hand comes away wet and red with blood. I look at my side and remember that was where I was shot. I take off the poor excuse of a bandage to reveal a few poorly done stitches. *A few stitches are better than bleeding out in this tiny cage* I thought to myself.

I fade in and out of consciousness but when I fully come to my senses there is a man standing next to me. I slowly realize who the man is. It's Teddy. I reach up thinking that Teddy was here to save me. But he quickly steps away from me, and with a look of guilt, he realizes who I was. Confused and scared I lay back down on the mattress. But Teddy grabs my arms and pulls me to my feet, he then picks me up and carries me out of the room. Instead of carrying me to safety he carried me to another small room with a table with straps on it. He places me on the bed and straps down my arms. Then he just stands there looking at me. His face was red and splotchy like he was crying.

"Why are you doing this?" I croaked.

Teddy responded with, "I had no choice."

"Why not?" I asked.

"They're making me do this," he said.

"Who's making you do this?" I said.

"I . . . I . . . Just didn't have a choice," he said breathing heavily between each word like he was trying not to cry.

"You always have a choice!" I pleaded.

"You don't get it. These people I'm working for are ruthless. They don't care who they hurt or what it costs! All I know is that your family is a threat to their plan" he said.

"But why me?" I asked almost to myself

"I don't know, All I know is that they want you and your entire family, dead," he said and left, closing the door tightly behind him. After I realized what had just happened only one word stood out to me. Dead. I knew that my dad was the head police officer in town. But nothing ever happened in this town. Or so I thought. When I was little my parents told me that there was a science lab near bell woods that I wasn't going to. In middle school, all of the upper-classmen tried to scare us with stories. But now that I'm in a life or death situation I'm starting to think that they weren't just stories.

The room where I was being held captive was a small room with off-white walls. It looked more like a prison cell mixed with a torcher room. The mattress that I was on top of was even smaller and thinner than the one in the other room. From my waist up only fitted on the bed with my leg dangling off and my arms strapped to my sides, I fell asleep.

After a long and unsettling night strapped to the table a tall man that looked like the friendly next-door neighbor in a t.v show walked in. The only difference was that this man had on a white lab coat and had muddled hair that was flopping in his face and looked like a new parent that just had twins.

"Did you sleep well?" the tall man asked.

I quickly remarked, "Well the room could have been a bit nicer."

The tall man ignored my comment and walked over to a small metal table. He picked up a small syringe that had a teal blue liquid in it. He walked over to the table where I was strapped down.

"What's that?" I asked.

"Just a little something to help you relax." He responded.

After the man answered my question he placed the needle of the syringe into my arm right below the crease of my elbow. The tall man then placed the needle on a tray with a small bottle of more blue stuff next to it. After he placed the syringe on the tray he walked out of the room and locked the door. I was expecting an immediate reaction to the blue stuff the man put into my arm, but nothing happened at first. If anything I was more ready to fight then before. But after a few minutes, my eyes began to feel very heavy. I tried to keep my eyes open knowing that if I closed them then something bad would happen but I eventually gave in to my tiredness.

I was woken up by a sharp stabbing pain in my side where I was shot, and in my arm where the blue stuff was injected into me. I quickly came to my senses. When I opened my eyes there were two new people in the room

along with the tall man and Teddy. The two new people were both men. *They must be brothers* I thought to myself. The two men looked almost identical except one had a birthmark right under his left eye, but they were both short and very broad. The two men were holding Teddy with their arms linked with his. The tall man was standing in front of everyone else. I began to reach for my arms when the restraints pulled my right arm down again with a loud bang. The tall man looked up from his clipboard where he was writing down notes and looked over to me.

"Oh good, you're awake," the tall man said with a smirk.

"Yeah I mean it's kinda hard to sleep when you feel like you're being stabbed," I said

The tall man got a small chuckle out of my comment, but he then turned away from me to one of the brothers taking notes. The tall man asked the brother a question. But I couldn't make out what he was saying. The brothers turned to each other and had a puzzled look on their faces. They shook their heads. The tall man turned back to me then back to the brother and nodded his head to the door. They both dropped Teddy and walked out the door followed by the tall man.

A few minutes after the scientist left Teddy recovered from being dropped and slowly got up from off the floor and walked over to me. As he walked over to me I could see that his face was still puffy and red and that he had a bruise forming on the right side of his face in the middle of his cheek. He staggered over to me and placed his hand on the side of the table I was laying on. I tried to speak but I was overwhelmed with a feeling of tiredness. I was forcing my eyes to stay open when Teddy said "you can sleep, I won't hurt you." and with that, I fell asleep.

I keep getting woken up by terrifying dreams. They were the type of dream where you don't even know if it's a dream or not and when you wake up all you want to do is forget them but you can't. I found myself waking up screaming. Teddy was sitting on the floor next to my table. He was rubbing his wrist where his handcuffs were. He looked up at me with a concerned look on his face.

"Bad dream?" he asked

"Yeah," I said with a little nod. Then I stared at the wall trying to forget the most recent dream that had awoken me. I was about to ask Teddy how long I had been asleep when three new doctors walked in, and Teddy suddenly stood up. Two of the doctors grabbed teddy's arms and dragged him out of the room. The third doctor looked at me then down at his clipboard and walked out following Teddy and the other two doctors. A few minutes later I could hear Teddy screaming through the barely open door. After what felt like hours teddy stopped screaming. I suddenly sat straight up. I didn't know why not hearing teddy scream was so alarming, but it was, at least when he was screaming I knew that he was alive, But now I don't know what happened. After another restless night, Teddy came back into the room with tears slowly trickling down his face. He was followed by the tall man, the brothers, and the doctors that dragged Teddy out of the room. This time Teddy was walking behind everyone. His handcuffs had been taken off and he had bruises and scrapes all over his arms and face. The brothers and the tall man were standing behind him as the other three doctors came over to where I was laying and undid the straps holding my arms down. They then drag me off the table and onto the floor. As I tried to stand up my knees gave in and I fell to the ground. I was kneeling on the floor when Teddy approached me with a gun in his hand. He looked down at me with remorse. Neither of us said anything, we just stared at each other. Then the tall man then walked over and stood next to Teddy with a gun in his hand. The tall man held the gun to Teddy's head.

"Shoot her or we will kill you and your entire family," the tall man ordered.

Teddy hesitantly raised his arm.

"I'm so sorry," he said to me.

"No... No... No" he mouthed over and over again while shaking. He had tears streaming down his face. He tried to gulp in the air but he couldn't catch his breath. I didn't know what was going to happen. I closed my eyes in interpretation. I heard the bullet shot out of the gun. I heard people fall to the ground. But the tall man still stood next to teddy. The tall man shot me right in the middle of my chest. I opened my eyes and looked down at where I was shot. Teddy ran away from where he was standing and tried to grab me. But it was too late and I fell to the ground. Dead.

I laid on the ground. My heart was beating so loud that I couldn't hear myself think. I felt Teddy placing me on his lap cradling me, sobbing. I couldn't hear him over the sound of my heartbeat. He looked like he was trying to reassure me. He tried to smile but he couldn't stop crying. I looked up at him and placed my cold wet hand on top of his. I tried to take a deep breath and closed my eyes. I died there in Teddy's arms.

I never left the white room with the table that I had been strapped to for two days. I never saw my friends and family ever again. I never got to see Annie and Mabel grow up. I will never become a doctor and get to help people. Nothing.

Michael van orman

Age: 16, Grade: 11

School Name: Manchester High School, Midlothian, VA

Educator: Rebecca Lynch

Category: Science Fiction & Fantasy

Typo: Banana Sunday

Typo: Banana Sunday

The clock ticks forward. It's currently 11:34 pm, Saturday night. I sit in my bed, restless yet petrified in fear. I glance around my shabby bedroom, double checking for a monster I know isn't there (although by 12 there will be). Finally getting over myself, I sit up and walk to turn on the TV and go to the bathroom. As I rinse my face in the sink, the TV births colorful light and splays it across my room. Illuminated after hours of darkness, the room seems to stir just like me. A neon glow glints off a shotgun sitting by my bedside, which gives it an almost holy aura.

"Make sure your preparations are in order for Sunday!" a voice from the TV beckons. "We urge you to get to a designated shelter as fast as possible and if physically possible should you begin to experience the following: overpowering sweet or fruity aroma, yellowing of the skin or vision, loss of sense of touch, breathlessness, seizure like cramps and convulsions, massive bruises across the body, and/or hard stem like growths on the scalp or neck." As the PSA rambles on yet again I shamble over to the window and pry open the blinds. I peer down to the streets below, patrolled by armed men and illuminated in a sick orange glow from the headlights of what seems like an armada of armoured vans. Despite their numbers they have always been nothing but a waste. They could have every army in the world on patrol and they still wouldn't be able to stop it. I think everyone knows the only reason the feds send them out is to pretend like the government can actually do something and aren't bumbling idiots going on a powertrip trying to fight borderline gods. All that's ever truly worked is to hunker down, wait, and defend yourself. As I glance down at the world from the fifth floor of my apartment complex, the blinds slip from my fingers.

I check and, sure enough, my fingers are rendered spongy soft and Crayola yellow. I jog back to the washroom and quickly open the cupboards under the sink to get my saving grace: industrial cleaner. As I rub my hands in borderline bleach, tears start to stream down my face like a warm rain. The pain was barely tolerable, like sticking my hands in boiling water. Surely enough, however, my hands return back from the brink of no return.

I walk to my kitchen with sore eyes and open the fridge. What awaits me are boxes of leftover chinese food, ice cold water bottles, and an ever so convenient box of various medicines. I grab the box from the bottom shelf of the fridge, walk to my couch, and plop down. I pop open the box and retrieve a cold rag to wrap around my hand. After a few minutes of sitting and taking deep, calm breaths, I sit up and put away my first aid kit before grabbing a bottled water from the fridge. Slowly sipping, I look at the various survival books which stare out from my bookshelf in a sort of resolute nihilism. The knowledge contained within had steeled me over the years and prepared me for this day more than any taxpayer paid program ever has.

As my TV warns of the upcoming rapture, I make sure my door is deadbolted and that my bedroom door is locked tight. I briefly pick up my shotgun, wielding it like a mythological weapon from some forgotten pantheon. I set it back, happy to know it is in pristine condition as always. I slide the blanket around me, not bothering to turn off the TV. I check the clock one last time.

It's 12:03

It's Banana Sunday.

Savannah Vonesh

Age: 17, Grade: 11

School Name: Maggie L Walker Governor's School, Richmond, VA

Educator: Ed Coleman

Category: Critical Essay

The United States Is Not Religiously Tolerant Yet

The United States is somewhat unique in that it does not claim a national religion. Of the world's 197 countries, only 26 are secular states (Omondi). This religious neutrality was quite purposeful. Founding fathers, notably Thomas Jefferson, James Madison, and George Washington, specifically wanted to avoid government interference in religious matters, in part inspired by the religious oppression that fueled the colonization of North America. While the intent for religious tolerance existed, the majority of the country practiced varying forms of, predominantly Protestant Christianity and the main forms of religious conflict were inter-Christian. Because of this emphasis on Christianity, when the Founding Fathers introduced religious toleration, it had a largely Christian rationale and purpose. The original ideal, though flawed from the Christian environment, fell short in the follow through. American politicians and American people present an often contradictory picture of tolerance. Despite the original goals, the United States has failed to achieve a truly secular and tolerant country.

Settlement in the "New World" was spurred by money and religion. Original ventures from countries like England and Spain were fueled by greed, and the first permanent English settlement, the basis for the United States today, was Jamestown, an economic venture by the Virginia Company of London. More than monetary gain, however, freedom from religious persecution prompted several migrations into the Americas. In England, the subjects of the crown had been forced to conform to Catholicism or Anglican Protestantism, a conformity that became increasingly difficult as the crown oscillated between the different religions. As colonization in the New World increased and England underwent religious upheaval, a wave of Puritans headed to the colonies to escape religious persecution. The Puritans established the Massachusetts Bay Colony, a place they considered to be "a city upon a hill" as they believed they would be the epitome of devoutness and an example for all others to follow. Ironically, though they fled in order to find religious freedom, the Puritans were intolerant of dissenting political opinions. Mary Dyer, a Quaker woman, was hung because she practiced Quakerism in Massachusetts and refused to leave. Other nonconformists were similarly banished or executed (Davis 474). Rhode Island and Connecticut were established in response to the intolerant Puritan practices and both were more religiously inclusive, Rhode Island even accepting atheists. Pennsylvania was a friendly Quaker based colony. Early settlements were largely religious, and while some were more accommodating than others towards other types of Christians, many groups within those settlements fought with conflicting sects. The majority of the incoming religious groups tried to convert the Native Americans in the area, often resorting to violence if their advances were refused. Religion was a key part of community and culture and so it became ingrained in the developing society. Today, over 70% of the United States population is Christian and only roughly 6% is a non-Christian faith, while the rest are unaffiliated ("Religion in America"). Protestant Christianity built the United States; the United States is a Christian Country.

When the colonies gained independence from Great Britain and it came time to create a new form of government, the founding fathers attempted to insert religious tolerance into a Christian country and expressed strong desires to remain unaffiliated with any religion. The Constitution lacks almost any recognition of God, George Washington emphasized the need for an inclusive country, and James Madison and Thomas Jefferson fought for religious rights in their states and the country as a whole (Davis 474-476). In his defense against a bill that would fund Christian education with government funds, Madison wrote that religion "of every man must be left to the conviction and conscience of every man" and that religious freedom is an inalienable right (Madison 478). Jefferson passed legislation allowing the assembly of any religious group in Virginia and declared that no person could have religion or types of religion forced upon them (Jefferson 482). Unfortunately, only so much religious toleration can come from a country steeped in a history of Christianity. Jefferson's *Virginia Act for Establishing Religious Freedoms* references "Almighty God" as the creator of mankind's free will (Jefferson 481). He uses this to argue that each person deserves the right to pursue their religious leanings, as dictated by God. The legal implications of the act protect those of all faiths, and Jefferson was rightly proud of it. The use of God to argue his point, however, is less

inspiring from a modern perspective aware of the diversity of spiritualities that do not believe in the Abrahamic God. Jefferson's advocacy for religious freedom is inherently contradicted by his use of "God"; while not necessarily intolerant, it isolates non-God-worshippers. Madison's valiant defense against the Christianization of the government reveals Christian based rationales and condescension upon closer inspection. He writes that religion should be kept apart from the government, but not merely because of the individual's right to religion. Madison also believed that associating the two would imply that a government official is also a "competent Judge of Religious Truth" which would be blasphemous to the Christian religion (Madison 479). Additionally, he wrote that allowing the government to support Christian education would debase the religion by implying that it needed government aid (Madison 479). While this perspective is not inherently intolerant, it is disheartening that a document arguing for secularism actually argues for the protection of Christianity. Madison goes beyond protection though and says that "those whose minds have not yet yielded to the evidence" of Christianity, deserved religious rights, which, while a progressive statement for freedom, is very condescending (Madison 479). Tolerance should not come from condescending to accept those who have different beliefs but embracing the validity of each separate means of faith. These documents are indicative of the Christian bias present in the early tolerance legislation. Aside from further proving that the United States is a Christian country, it shows how our country has always prioritized Christianity in legislation. Other religions might not be specifically harmed, but if one religion gets preferential treatment and provided the basis for government decisions, it would seem the country is not religiously tolerant.

In fairness, these problems are only illustrated in the context of modern society. Now that Americans are composed of a more diverse array of religious practitioners and interact with a wide array of people across the world of different faiths, tolerance requires more than an acceptance of a variety of Christians. The founding fathers lived in a Christian world, so naturally, their work was influenced by this. The fact that these men implemented reforms that served to protect all people from religious persecution, even if condescending at times, is still revolutionary in comparison to other countries at the time. To look at these documents and say that Madison was discriminatory might be true in today's world but not accurate given the time period. That said, while it is important to acknowledge presentism, the role of Christianity in the birth of the United States' government and the religious perspectives of the founding fathers should be accounted for in modern legislation.

The United States government has a history of contradicting itself when it comes to religion. The original establishments of secular government, after all, argued based on religious principles. For a government built on the separation of church and state, and awful lots of legislation has been passed due to Christian beliefs. Policy regarding abortion and legalization of same-sex marriage are classic examples of religiously fueled political debates. The legalization of same-sex marriage came about eventually, but only after immense amounts of opposition from traditional Christians who felt that same-sex marriage was 'wrong' based on their religious values. In this situation, marriage laws that would in no way affect those that opposed them were deterred for religious belief. In a government that is supposed to operate without religious influence, the fact that religious arguments prevented laws from passing for so long demonstrates a preference for a religion. Prioritizing one religion over other religions, especially when it comes to secular matters, is intolerant, in a sense. Religious intolerance is even more obvious sometimes. In 2017, President Trump announced that Christian Syrian refugees would be given priority over Muslim ones (Rampbell). In Texas, state offices are open to anyone who "acknowledge[s] the existence of a Supreme Being" (Texas), effectively discriminating against atheists, agnostics, and atheistic religions. In a secular state that has religious tolerance, atheism should not be targeted. Atheism had historically been frowned upon; when Madison defended a secular government, it did not occur to him to defend a citizen with secular beliefs, basing his argument on individual spirituality (Madison 478-450). When communism became the public's favorite fear in the 1950s, atheism became the enemy (Davis 475). While Jefferson wrote that "no man shall be compelled to frequent or support any religious worship" (Jefferson 482), in 1811 the Pennsylvania Supreme Court said, "Whatever strikes at the root of Christianity tends manifestly to the dissolution of civil government" (Cep). By the 1950s, Louis Rabaut, a Catholic Representative of the House, declared, "From the root of atheism stems the evil weed of communism" (Cep). The phrase "under God" was added to the Pledge of Allegiance and Daily Prayers were enacted in the White House. While students are legally allowed to remain silent during the Pledge of Allegiance, the addition at all is discriminatory to any religious group that does not identify with "God" as well as those who do not identify as having any higher power.

Perhaps even more indicative of a country's tolerance is the attitude of the communities, not just the government, though the government both impacts and reflects the actions and opinions of its people. The Government condemned atheism and gently guided its people away from it, and a mistrust of atheists is strong in the people. According to Pew Research Center, 42% of Americans feel that having good morals is dependent on a belief in God (Lipka). It is a commonly held belief, even amongst other atheists, that atheists are more immoral than religious practitioners (Grewal). Interestingly enough, atheists reportedly find more wonder and spirituality in the world (Lipka) and have been shown to be more generous than those who grew up in a religion (Sherwood). Atheism has become so reviled

that people would rather see a Muslim, gay, or female president than an atheist one, and atheists are considered the least desirable potential child-in-law (Grewal). Even Boy Scouts of America, despite opening their ranks to all genders, sexualities, and religions, by their code should refuse to allow atheists or agnostics (Cep).

In the history of the United States, only a few presidents were not outrightly Christian: Thomas Jefferson, who identified most as a deist; Abraham Lincoln who ranges from Christ incarnate to not Christian depending on the source; and Andrew Johnson who did not have a formal affiliation but considered himself a Christian. Only one president has been a Roman Catholic. Despite the general acceptance of various Christian sects within Christianity, Catholics have historically conflicted with Protestants. In 1960, John F. Kennedy felt the need to address his religion. As no Catholic president had yet been elected, there was pressure to make a public announcement explaining how Kennedy believed “in an America where the separation of church and state is absolute” and that instead of being seen as a Catholic candidate he desired to be seen as “the Democratic Party’s candidate for president who happens to also be a Catholic” (Kennedy 487-488). Divides between Catholics and Protestants, however, have lessened in comparison to the conflicts between Christians and other religious groups, particularly Islam, Judaism, and the growing portion of Americans without a religion. Kennedy was the first Roman Catholic, but in all 236 years of The United States’ existence, every president has been Christian or had close Christian affiliation. In a country governed for the people by the people, elections assumedly represent the values and preferences of the people, and the lack of diversity in presidents indicates what Americans will tolerate in power. This would clearly indicate the position of Christianity in American society. As John Fea put it, “if [...] the United States was not ‘founded on the Christian religion,’ then someone forgot to tell the American people” (Fea 500).

Beyond preference for Christian power, American society seems to lack toleration for other religions. Anti-Semitism has been abundant for decades and a staunch aversion to atheism has existed since the 1950s (Davis 477). Islamophobia has also been rampant, particularly in 2016 and 2017 (Kishi). George Washington may have dreamed that “the Children of the Stock of Abraham” would “enjoy the good will of the other inhabitants” (Washington 483), but today synagogues and Jewish cemeteries are defaced with swastikas and synagogues receive threatening antisemitic emails. While the government has taken steps to punish hate crimes, there were over 1,600 religiously targeted hate crimes in 2018 according to the FBI Hate Crime Statistics (FBI National Press Office).

In a country as large as the United States, understanding religious tolerance can be difficult and subjective. One intolerant individual does not represent a problem with the country, but the country is made of individuals, and their perspectives matter. To see the mix of support and hate for other Americans of different religious affiliations within the country’s population is both inspiring and worrying. There’s a distinction between the legislation of the government and the beliefs of its people. Government officials both serve the people and act as guiding figures. When politicians make decisions because of religion in non-religious matters or speak against one religious group, it in turn represents the people. Similarly, the actions of the population represent the country. While the founding fathers created a beautiful ideal policy of secular government and tolerance for all faiths and leaders have since spoken on upholding this ideal, there is a gap between the ideals and policies and the reality of tolerance. In the struggle between the ideal and the lack of tolerance the country faces, both citizens and statesmen need to rise to the ideal and work to raise one another. It is important to note that in comparison to many other countries where citizens can be arrested for practicing the wrong faith, the United States is very tolerant. The ability to point out the flaws in the system only comes from the system existing at all. While the United States has all makings for a tolerant country, it needs to transcend beyond ideals.

Patience Wallace

Age: 17, Grade: 12

School Name: Appomattox Regional Governor's School, Chesterfield, VA

Educators: Cindy Cunningham, Patty Smith

Category: Personal Essay & Memoir

Color Me White

Color Me White

When I was younger, I never realized all of the decorations in my home were African and African-American based. The mahogany masks on the wall, decorated with colorful beads and vibrant paint, yet terrifying with sharp wooden teeth and slanted eyes. The bronze faces protected by shadow boxes, their anguished faces permanently melded into a silent scream, tinted green with rusty bells, were just art. The daily verse calendar with big breasted women in Kwanzaa colored head wraps with dark brown faces. However, I did notice the black mother and daughter on a bread-colored pew reading a bible. The grandmother on a pottery-glazed bench reading a wordless bible to a boy with eyes that didn't blink.

As I got older I paid attention to the solemn-faced painting of Rosa Parks, her back rigid to a dark leather bus seat. The black empowerment poem by Maya Angelou written in dancing purple and green letters, her brown face with a salt and pepper afro plastered to the bottom. The statuettes of black angels, a black Jesus with beaded dreads on the boat with his Followers, black pottery women on their knees, hands clasped, heads to the ground. For Christmas, a black nativity scene, topped with a nappy headed Mary and a dark-skinned baby Jesus. My mother's Jesus was black, while my picture bible taught me Jesus was white, God an old white man with a beard white as snow and eyes blue as the first ocean he created. I was pretty darn sure Jesus was white. I didn't understand why mom's stuff wasn't the same. I always took her black power disposition a little too far. Black Jesus, as far as I was concerned, did not exist.

These things became too real, 10 year old me angry as my mother told me to sit in the front of the bus, away from my friends; furious as she talked about ancestors who died for me to sit in the front, saying it was just plain disrespect. My twelve-year-old dark brown face drawn with secret tears I'd never admit to, as I learned light-skinned were in; when my friend sat me down and told me guys just didn't like girls as black as I am. Even in second grade, I was told my skin was like dirt and I suddenly became less-than than my copper-colored girls in my class. When I started to write all my characters were white. Every character with silky brown hair and green eyes, the princesses I wrote about had blond boyfriends with hair the color of gold. I just never thought about writing about black characters, it was just obvious to have people that looked like the girls around me who were called gorgeous complete with a freckled smile, should have the center stage. I didn't realize that white was my "regular", it'd be strange to think of anything else, what novels had I even read with a black girl as the main character? When did my Barbies not have freckles and rosy cheeks, there wasn't even a black Ken to marry my Barbies to.

Wasn't the peach crayon the first color I reached for? How even in the innocent book of fairy tales Rapunzel's hair was the color of straw, Peter Pan a little boy with coffee-colored hair and devilish green eyes, always on the lookout for the atomic blond fairy, Tinkerbell. It wasn't until I was eight I even had a black princess to compare myself to, someone with lips and a nose just like me. Flipping through the pages of my old coloring books, each face is the same as the last; my dandelion yellow crayon-colored down to nothing more than a snub.

When did I stop coloring black women, when did every eye I colored was blue? I was just another black girl, nothing special. I grew up thinking there was no beauty in blackness, no beauty in curves, and mocha-colored skin. Why would I? Had I ever seen a model with hair as kinky as mine on the front cover?

I hadn't. I felt like I would never be enough unless I was white. Unfortunately, so many people of color consciously or unconsciously deal with this inferiority complex. It doesn't take much time, even at a young age, that there was something that made us different-- and not in a good way. Whether it be the way we were addressed, little comments, or just the way we were looked at. As we grew older we were faced with images of black boys getting shot dead in the streets, when female African-Americans started fearing for the lives of their black fathers and brothers. When we realized that because we were colored black-- not brown, could determine if you lived or died. Looking at my old crayons, the black crayon; labeled "negro" in Spanish reminded me that we are just pictures in a

coloring book; waiting for our fates to be determined by a color.

Patience Wallace

Age: 17, Grade: 12

School Name: Appomattox Regional Governor's School, Chesterfield, VA

Educator: Patty Smith

Category: Flash Fiction

Burnt

Burnt

My hands are covered in Crisco and sweat, baking flour-coated under my fingernails. I breathe in tune to the steady scratching, grinding the small spatula back and forth to clean the crusted pan. My son stands by me with his face still and judgemental.

Blackened crumbs dust the stovetop, breaking apart into a dry sand. I left them in the oven for too long. Again. They burned to the pan, the sweet cookie dough transformed into tasteless coal.

All cookies bake differently, I've had my share of them. I made ones in my third trimester that were as flat as a pancake and thin as paper. I didn't know it then, but I should've put more flour in the cookies. I had to grow up all on my own, stubborn to help, and a slave to Family Dollar cookbooks. He left me loveless, an empty clueless shell drunk off powdered sugar and isomalt crystals. I became determined to keep my cookies from failing; it's no use going falling in love with baking, love of making something wonderful then ending up with regrets.

I made snickerdoodle cookies on my son's first birthday, picture perfect but spicy as a bitch. My mother stood holding my baby and shaking her head at my insolence. Like my single motherhood was my fault, like I chose to make spicy snickerdoodles instead of the cinnamon flavor we all love. I rarely had the money for sugar so in my innocence I assumed cinnamon would make it sweeter, but cinnamon is foreign and mysterious, not unlike the man who stared at me from the empty bar. Not unlike the man who sealed every promise with a hershey kiss, proved our love with a butterfly cupcake ring. Snickerdoodles are a waste of time.

On my third birthday after becoming a mother, I made sugar cookies with lime green icing. The grittiness was too much, clumps of granulated sugar in my icing, bits of eggshell in the cookie. We used to make cookies together, he made the dough and I made the icing. He could be elbow deep in flour and still be beautiful. Cookies should last forever, but it so quickly hardens to a sugary rock. I threw the cookies out, I can't love anymore.

Today I made cookies for my son. He loves chocolate chip cookies, how the chocolate sticks to your fingers and the cookie dissolves in your mouth. His friend's mother's could bake better cookies than me, could make better icing than me, better lives than me; primped and plucked husbands to guide their hand through the mixing bowl. But I can do the same. I could make cookies, I could be better, I could mean something. I don't need a man to buy me flour, I don't need a rose gold ring on my finger to be happy. We all have the same chocolate but only mine burns.

I scrape the remaining pieces of cookie into the trash, the burnt chocolate morsels sticking to the wax paper, the oil in the cookie leaving an ugly yellow splotch. My son stands behind me, somber and silent, his six-year-old obsidian eyes regarding the trash can with looks of disappointment.

"You can't bake," my son states plainly.

"No-- I never could."

Paige Walworth

Age: 16, Grade: 11

School Name: Maggie L Walker Governor's School, Richmond, VA

Educator: Michele Surat

Category: Critical Essay

The Representation of the Rwandan Genocide in Film and the Verisimilitude of "Hotel Rwanda"

The Representation of the Rwandan Genocide in Film and the Verisimilitude of *Hotel Rwanda*

Twenty five years ago, the Central African country Rwanda experienced the mass killing of 800,000 Tutsis, which would later be known as the Rwandan genocide. The film *Hotel Rwanda* explores the Rwandan genocide through the story of a hotel manager named Paul Rusesabagina, who opened his hotel as a place for Tutsi refugees. Paul was a Hutu, although his wife and children were considered Tutsi. When the violence of the war began to reach them, Paul fled to the hotel with his family members and neighbors hoping to find safety. He managed to buy off the Hutu military leaders with alcohol, money, and other expensive goods, allowing in the end for 1,200 people to be saved. *Hotel Rwanda* raises the issue of the divides between races, the impact of colonizers on the African continent, and the extent to which people will go to survive, along with educates viewers about the importance and impact that the Rwandan genocide had on the country of Rwanda.

The Rwandan genocide took place from April to July in the year 1994, the same year in which Nelson Mandela became president and apartheid was ended in South Africa. However, while this southern nation was making strides forward, Rwanda, located in Central Africa near the Democratic Republic of Congo and Uganda, was facing the challenge of a racial genocide. Initiated by the class distinction formed by the German and later Belgian colonizers, the Hutu grew to despise the Tutsi, who were placed in higher positions of power due to them being the minority and believed to have more European features. The genocide was sparked by the assassination of president Juvenal Habyarimana, a Hutu, in a plane crash. The Hutu blamed this on the Tutsi, leading to their justification of the killing around 800,000 Tutsi.

The conflict between the Hutu and Tutsi began with the initial divide between them due to their agriculturalist and pastoralist backgrounds respectively, and was later heightened by the settling of the land by German and later Belgian colonists, who saw this existing dispute and heightened it for their advantage. In the movie, it is stated by the Hutu radio program,

“When people ask me, good listeners, why do I hate all the Tutsi, I say, ‘Read our history.’ The Tutsi were collaborators for the Belgian colonists, they stole our Hutu land, they whipped us. Now they have come back, these Tutsi rebels. They are cockroaches. They are murderers. Rwanda is our Hutu land. We are the majority. They are a minority of traitors and murderers. We will squash this infestation. We will wipe out the RPF (Rwandan Patriotic Front) rebels. This is RTLM, Hutu power radio.”

This represents the hatred that the Hutu felt towards the Tutsi due to the Tutsis’ history of being in higher political positions and having more power. The Tutsi were given higher positions in politics and were wealthier despite being the minority race, thus leading for the resentment by Hutus to increase. As additionally seen in the movie, the Belgians gave each person an identification card, indicating whether they were Hutu or Tutsi, further enhancing this divide. In the movie, this helped Paul stay out of trouble, as he was Hutu, but created difficulties for his family and others seeking refuge. When Paul received help from one of the Hutu military leaders, he shuttled himself, his family, and his neighbors to the hotel. They arrived, but were carded afterwards where it was discovered that they were all Tutsi, which then required Paul to buy the safety of the Tutsi with money and goods. Overall, the influence by the colonizers led to existing divides to deepen, leading to the build up of resentment and ultimate occurrence of the Rwandan genocide.

Furthermore, the language used in the film was similar to how it was during the Rwandan genocide, in terms of reference for names of Tutsis. They were referred to as “cockroaches,” done so for the purpose of demeaning them

and to show how low the Hutu thought of them. This was similarly done with WWII and the Americans referring to the Japanese as “Japs”. Destroying the face and referring to a group as a derogatory term decreases sensitivity, heightens hatred, and overall decreases guilt when killing one of that group, as why this tactic was used by the Hutu during the Rwandan genocide.

During the genocide, foreign nations withdrew their aid, military personnel, and civilians from Rwanda. In *Hotel Rwanda*, this was shown with all of the white Belgian citizens being withdrawn from the hotel, leaving only a few UN Peacekeepers in their wake. These peacekeepers were unable to do much, thus leading to more trouble at the hotel and greater difficulty protecting the Tutsi. This also connects to the larger idea of the Europeans initiating the divide between the Hutu and the Tutsi, but turning a blind eye once violence emerged. Barely anything was known outside of Rwanda regarding the genocide and any known facts were not taken seriously or acted on, as it was believed that this issue was not that severe or important enough to be meddled with.

This film ultimately succeeded in portraying the Rwandan genocide as the tragedy it was, while telling it through the story of a man, who despite having a family and livelihood to lose, opened his heart and his hotel to those members of another race to save them from death. Telling the story of the Rwandan genocide through a real life story allowed for more connection to the people affected by this tragedy, rather than if told in a documentary format. While the 800,000 lives lost due to this genocide is nearly unfathomable, the film *Hotel Rwanda* makes an effort to convey the absolute fear, devastation, and violence that was in place during the genocide. However, the film could have done a better job conveying background information, such as the initial divide between the Hutu and the Tutsi, and the main spark of the genocide in order to provide further understanding with viewers who were previously unfamiliar with the Rwandan genocide. *Hotel Rwanda* followed its historical context well, and used specific historical details such as the names the Tutsis were referred to by and how machetes were used for fighting, although the film did add some events or situations purely for the cinematic value.

In summation, the film *Hotel Rwanda* represents the conflict of the Rwandan genocide and the impact that divisions between races can have. By expressing the tragedy of the genocide through the story of Paul Rusesabagina rather than in a documentary format, viewers are able to connect more with the story and understand the loss that they experienced better. Additionally, this film sheds light to the impact which the colonizers had on the continent of Africa, and how they worsened many pre-existing situations. Many outside countries did not care about or think that the Rwandan genocide was a severe issue, which lead to a lack of foreign aid during this time. The country of Rwanda is making efforts to rebuild from the genocide, as they are attempting to rebuild their weak economy, and have put steps in place to end the hatred between races. The current president has made steps to ban ethnic associations and labels, but the history of the Rwandan genocide will always be remembered.

Xiaochun Wang

Age: 17, Grade: 11

School Name: Steward School, Richmond, VA

Educator: Sejal Vaywala

Category: Critical Essay

The Rise of The Modern Era

The Rise of the Modern Era

The word “modern,” by definition, relates to the present rather than the past. However, on an existential scale, how should we define the boundary between this modern present and past? And, based on this boundary, when did “Modern History,” as we now call it, begin? When viewed on such a timeline, the Post-Classical Period, often perceived as the Middle Ages, is often placed prior to the Modern Era; therefore, in order to determine the beginning of Modern History, it is essential to first identify when the European Middle Ages concluded, which is most easily accomplished by comparing the distinctive characteristics of the Middle Ages and the Modern Era.

The Middle Ages are commonly considered as the period beginning shortly after the fall of the Holy Roman Empire, and it started with the implementation of the monarchy-led feudal system. Along with the surge of Scholasticism and similar intellectual movements, the European Middle Ages reached its peak during the Crusades. However, cracks in the system began to surface by the fourteenth century, characterized by the spread of the bubonic plague, the Great Famine, the questioning of the medieval lifestyle, and the breakdown of the synthesis of religion and rationalism. This decay of medieval traditions impelled a demand for change, initiating a new, “modern” era in Europe, beginning around the mid-fifteenth century. Pronounced by the rise of Europe as a global power, Modern History significantly differs from the previous period, most notably in relation to economics, societal norms, and politics.

One of the distinguishing qualities of the Modern Era is its dynamic economies, brought about by a new Western dominance and surge of innovative economic philosophies and policies. Following the fall of the crusader state Acre to the Mamluks in 1291 and the Ottoman conquest of Constantinople, Europe was desperate for innovation and expansionism, which were essential to resolving its debt problems and reducing its reliance on Muslim traders. Additionally, a series of events in the fifteenth century (notably the end of the Ming Chinese expeditions in 1433) heralded a new, European Age of Exploration. Starting from Christopher Columbus’s exploration of the Americas and Vasco De Gama’s expedition to India, European colonialism began, in sharp contrast from previous Asian-driven exploration. Because Asian trading networks had hitherto been confined to land, this focus on sea routes meant Europeans were suddenly capable of bringing far-flung states into their commercial spheres; moreover, they were able to reorganize regional trade by replacing the states’ original trading partners, such as Muslim traders in South Asia.

The West’s growing influence on the global economy was further confirmed by the discovery of silver mines in the Americas. Whereas previously there had been no unified currency between states, the Modern Era adopted silver as a common means of payment. Enriched by silver from the New World and fueled by the mercantilist idea that a country’s wealth is equal to the amount of precious metals it holds, Western economies flourished, eclipsing the colonized Eastern states and cementing the West’s domineering status for the centuries to come.

To accommodate the commercial changes due to Western predominance in trade, new economic policies were developed to supplement the need for labor forces and intercontinental commerce. As the native American population suffered greatly at the hands of imported disease and brutal treatment, labor became insufficient in the silver mines. In order to recompense this labor shortage, Europe expanded the African slave trade on an unprecedented scale, punctuating the first international extensive use of imported slaves. Mercantilism, the practice of managing a state’s economy so that its exports outweigh its imports, was utilized as well. Colonies, used as outlets for European products and sources for raw material, were ruthlessly exploited to support European self-sufficiency and accumulation of wealth.

The seeds of other, more recent economic philosophies, such as capitalism and communism, were also sown in the Modern Era, through the use of plantations in the Americas during the Industrial Revolution, diverging from the Post-Classical model of a central, government-planned economy. Because most of the American plantations were privately managed, a class of wealthy estate owners formed. These owners needed somewhere to invest their capital, thus spurring the Industrial Revolution and formation of the capitalist state. Through these changes, a working class emerged to meet the factory production demands – one that blamed its capitalist employers for poor working conditions and eventually led to socialist movements promoting utopian communist economies with equal distribution of wealth. These economic patterns, most considerably the start of globalization and the changing concept of trade, are hallmarks of the Modern Period's significant deviation from the economic models that came before.

Besides these features, the Modern Era also differed from prior historical periods on a social basis, with the development of new social values and societal divisions. Two particular periods in Modern History were crucial in shaping people's social values: the High Renaissance and the Industrial Revolution. Indeed, many novel ideologies were fabricated during the High Renaissance around the turn of the 16th century, some of which, such as humanism, individualism, and skepticism, were preserved for the next few centuries. Unlike the Post-Classical phenomenon, where faith and religion could directly influence people's actions, Renaissance humanism suggested that "human being[s] [were] the measure of all things" (Renaissance Values), stressing the magnitude of individual human power.

In addition, while people used to be considered as a part of the state or religious followers, Renaissance individualism enhanced the importance of personal achievement, approving of the act of living for oneself and thus constructing more room for the creative arts. Skepticism was also considered and reinforced as a vital element of the High Renaissance, stemming from its root in Greek philosophy. Whereas previously people were encouraged to accept, have faith, and blindly follow leaders, skepticism promoted a "questioning attitude," stating that it is "a good thing to experiment, try new things, and shake up the system" (Renaissance Values). These Renaissance ideologies altered people's social interactions by providing new lenses, which diverged from or even conflicted with previously established norms. Most importantly, the theories helped develop later political philosophies adopted by modern day governments, such as the Federal Government of the United States, through freethinking inspiration, providing possibilities to break the fixed mindsets with their novel belief in the independence of mind.

Another movement that molded the Modern Period's novel societal characteristics was the Industrial Revolution, during which classes and unions developed and the education system was overhauled. As the Industrial Revolution brought workers from farms into factories, society stratified into upper, middle, and working classes based on wealth, creating a class system that was no longer solely based on religious or political affiliations. The emergence of the working class, which included a majority of the population, led to the establishment of labor unions pushing for workers' rights. As the revolution progressed, the government continually amended workers' wages, work hours, and age restrictions, ultimately banning children from formally entering the workforce. This legislation made education more accessible for working class children, offering them a chance to escape poverty, an opportunity which never existed in the Middle Ages, when only wealthy families could send offspring to school. The social developments in the Modern Era, both during the High Renaissance and the Industrial Revolution, display a striking contrast with the medieval past. The impacts of these movements are still evident today, reinforcing confidence in free will and courage in the fights for equality.

Derived from its social and economic revolutions, the Modern Era's political changes are truly its defining trait. The construction of the modern political system, embodying democratic political theory, can be traced through the Renaissance, the Enlightenment, and the intellectual ferment of the Age of Revolution. At the end of the Middle Ages, the church's influence as a political institution began to dwindle, inciting secularism to advocate for a space away from religion. As secularism thrived, a growing number of people argued against church intervention in state affairs, and the once interdependent religious and political spheres began to separate, granting monarchs more direct power over their subjects. Following the Renaissance, the Protestant Reformation and the Scientific Revolution further attacked medieval norms, intensifying the decline of the church's authority. The questioning of the church and traditions ultimately led to the Enlightenment, where reasoning, rationalism, and scholasticism consolidated, leading to the development of progressive political theories and limitations on monarchical power.

Inspired by the Renaissance revival of Greek culture and democracy, many philosophers proposed topical political theories that challenged the established forms of absolutist governments. The most remarkable theories of the Enlightenment included John Locke's *Social Contract*, Baron de Montesquieu's 'checks and balances' model of

governance, and Voltaire's belief in the concepts of freedom of speech and religious tolerance. Motivated by these political philosophies, the 1688 Glorious Revolution deposed King James II and placed William and Mary on the throne, in the process establishing Parliament as England's ruling power and representing a shift from absolute to constitutional monarchy. The new concepts of religious freedom and individual participation in government drained the powers of kings and aristocrats, eventually leading to the Age of Revolution in the mid-eighteenth century.

Beginning with the American Revolution, which inspired the formation of a democratic government and the French Revolution, the bloody conclusion of which ended the nation's medieval absolutism, political revolutions brought into existence new political ideologies represented by Nationalism, Liberalism, and Radicalism. While Nationalism allowed citizens to form a collective identity based on culture, race, or ethnic origins rather than religion, Liberalism and Radicalism focused more on individual rights, especially voting rights, by limiting state interference, a Post-Classical governing method. Thus, the Modern Era's politics are distinctively unique from the past, principally defined by this assertion for natural rights and the questioning of the medieval political systems of churches, monarchs, and aristocrats.

Since the mid-fifteenth century, the Modern Era has represented a drastic change from the doldrums of the Middle Ages, particularly for Europe. After shifts in focus and the isolation of other global powers, trade was redefined by European expeditions in the Age of Exploration and ensuing explosion in transregional commerce. As more countries were pulled into this web of global trade, new economic philosophies emerged, cementing Western dominance and leading to the development of innovative policies. Such changes also stimulated social revolutions, including the ideological reforms of the High Renaissance, as well as the class divisions and the revised education systems of the Age of Revolution. The Modern Era has also been characterized by its radical political theories, which overturned centuries of medieval tradition. Ultimately, the economic, social, and political changes underpinning the Modern Era have created an environment primed for independent thinking and free-speech, leading the way for more just, democratic and equal societies.

Gabriella Watson

Age: 17, Grade: 12

School Name: Maggie L Walker Governor's School, Richmond, VA

Educators: Ed Coleman, Ed Coleman

Category: Personal Essay & Memoir

On Grief

Time heals all wounds. Are you okay? It will be okay. You'll get through this. They're in a better place. Just take it one day at a time. I'm sorry for your loss. I'm sorry. I don't know what to say. Remembering hurts but forgetting is harder. However, this is not a simple recount of a single moment of profoundly painful memories. That story is firmly underground and will remain there for now. This is a discussion of the aftermath. A discussion of grief: the pain left by the dead, the pain that never dies. Little angels carry souls away. In their absence, little demons are born. The first demon was sadness, a creepy imp with icy blue eyes and claws for hands, and a raspy voice. The second demon was time, his eyes soulless and black, a gaze firmly fixed ahead, a gaze that silenced, a gaze deadly and harsh, a gaze that made you feel insignificant. Their child was grief, a shapeless blob that always hovers, that never leaves.

I paused in front of the classroom under the bright lights in a little piece of home where my friends and I gather to share, triumphs, tribulations, food, and the finer things at 11:35 every day. Weeks ago, a friend that I'm not particularly close to said, "My grandfather died, I thought I would be fine but I'm not, I just want to go home." I cried out of sympathy, I cried out of memory, out of grief long buried. There are few things worse than watching someone you care about suffer from one of life's greatest tragedies and there is nothing you can do. It's like grasping at sand and all you can do is watch it fall through your fingers. My grandfather died when I was in sixth grade and it was the hardest thing I have ever been through. Hard is an inadequate word. I suffered an unspeakable and gut-wrenching loss that often left me numb. It took me years to stop crying when my family went home. The cloud of grief always lived in Pennsylvania and waited for me whenever I crossed the state line. However, the tragedy gave me the unique opportunity to be there for my friends. Only someone who has lost someone can understand the pain. You can explain it, they can imagine, but they won't understand what it feels like to be gripped by the claws of sadness, by the unfeeling nature of time, and the grief. In middle school, my best friend's grandmother died, and I was there for her. In high school, my best friend's grandmother died. There were new circumstances, new people, but the same god-forsaken tragedy. At this point, I felt like a grief coach uniquely capable of dealing with this pain. It hit me hard, like a sack of bricks to the heart and every time I listened to their pain, it bought back a wave of my own. I could never fully control my grief. Whenever I tried to grasp it, to push it away, my hand went straight through the misty emotion. However, with time, the cloud was fluffy and white and present but not painful if I didn't think too hard.

Day -1: A week or two passes and I think of my friend in the back of my mind, but they returned to school and we all moved on. I had a date planned for Saturday at 3 pm. My boyfriend was coming over to my house and we planned to watch a movie. At 2:50 my dad rushed downstairs and out the door like a gust of wind, fleeting, powerful, and gone. My mom explained that my grandmother had hit her head and that dad was going up to Pennsylvania to see her. They didn't know anything. All I could think was not again. Not another time my dad leaves to go to Pennsylvania to see a parent, and he doesn't make it in time. Not again. My boyfriend arrives and I explain what's going on and that I don't want to think about it. We have a lovely time that exists in a bubble of suspended time. The world and its troubles float to the edge of my mind for a brief time. It is a quiet before the storm, a sheet of smooth water I reflect upon. I know everything that follows will be muddled and blurry. Later in the evening, my mother came to my room and we talked.

"Is it serious?"

"Yes?"

"Will she remember me?"

"What do you mean?"

“Well, if she hit her head and has brain damage, will she remember me?...Nevermind, what are the chances she’ll be okay?”

Silence: A pesky little creature that fills my head with chattering voices of worry and grim possibilities

“Over here we have completely okay, then next brain damage, and then never okay.”

“I don’t think the first one’s an option. I’ll let you know when I know anything.”

And then my mother left. Shortly after, she returned and asked if I wanted to talk to my grandmother. She told me my grandmother was unconscious but she believed she could hear me. I paused and asked, “Are you asking me this because it’s my last chance to say something?” She responded yes and gave me a minute.

I told my grandmother I loved her and I was thinking of her laugh and how she made every holiday special like even St. Patrick’s Day by sending little notes and packages. I said I loved her. She never said it back at this point, but she knew my love long before then. I called my best friend who knew this pain. She didn’t answer. I called my boyfriend and he didn’t know what to say and I didn’t expect him to. I’ve been on both sides of the grieving and assured him, all I needed was someone to listen. I realized something on the phone. If, when she died, she wouldn’t be able to see me graduate. In her old house, she always sat on the same side of the couch which was close to the big chair where my grandfather always sat. On the other side of the couch, there were pictures of all of the grandchildren who graduated high school. I always wanted to have my picture there alongside my older cousins, in the warmth and pride of the living room. When I realized that something I wanted all my life may not, was not, could not happen, I cried instant tears of sadness over the phone. My best friend called me back and we talked into the next morning around 2 am. I was fearful because I knew a storm was brewing. I provided the first ingredient: the streaks of rain underneath my eyes, and time marched on providing the second. The grief set in, the train of sadness dragged me aboard and took me to dark destinations.

Day 1: I don’t remember going to sleep. I won’t remember her voice eventually. Memories are fleeting unlike grief. I woke up and turned on my phone to check the time. I had a Facebook notification and a friend request. This request was from the relative of a Facebook friend that happened to have the same first name as my grandmother. At that moment, I knew my grandmother was dead. I went down the stairs and ran my hands along the sad, brown walls and asked my mother. She confirmed and said they took her off life support around 1 am. It gave me some comfort that I was awake when she went to sleep forever. My boyfriend came by later with my favorite cookies, chocolate chip cookies, and held me for a few minutes. It was a great and comforting warmth against the cold darkness. I want to spend a minute discussing the significance of the chocolate. These bittersweet morsels of warmth reminded me of my grandfather and the chocolate chip pancakes we shared over breakfast. He’s gone. Now, these bittersweet morsels of warmth reminded me of my grandmother and the darkness shared by my family after dinner. They’re both gone. The two demons, sadness and time, nudged the massive Gates of Hell covered by scorned faces and trapped demons. By the little opening of Hell, they slammed a door in my life. Grief struck me with its powerful lightning and there was an abrupt end of new stories, new memories, new adventures, in a flash.

I spent the remainder of the day telling my other friends what had happened. After about the fourth time, it grew tedious and mundane. I felt like I was chewing a piece of gum for hours on end where it loses all flavor and is just a wet, deformed blob. I guess after hours of repeated numbness, I resembled this wad of gum. I was the wet cloud of grief. This was not the first time I felt this pain. Round two has started and I could feel the grief creeping around the corner waiting to grab me in its dark embrace.

Day 2: After being condemned to an endless day of sadness my hope was fading. As I exited the car at my bus stop, I was greeted by a three-person hug. Surrounded on all sides by love. Two of the people didn’t even know why they were hugging me. One of my friends only told them to give me some love. These are the moments where a small part of my dying belief in human nature is restored. As I walked into school, I was greeted by my friends in a never-ending chain of hugs. Hugs are the most powerful form of affection. Hugs push down the grief with an unearthly power and physically say, “I have you, and I care, and it’s okay.” It was still the first 48 hours, everyone else’s timeline for grief. My best friend and I found a room and sat in the darkness and I found a little comfort.

All day I was met with “I’m sorry for your loss” and “it’s okay”. Those words alone do nothing to lessen the grief. The emotion and intent behind the words are what’s important. I couldn’t focus in math class. It was a long day, and I was overwhelmed by the prospect of working non-stop to avoid falling behind. I was confused and frustrated and angry so I left. I trudged slowly up to the counselor’s office and was stopped by a teacher in the hallway asking if I were okay. I meekly responded no and cried in a room. I let the grief wash over me for 15 minutes. Grief does not

have a time limit but time never slows.

"You're wearing all black... You were wearing all black yesterday."

"I know."

People noticed I was sad but I had to remind them why. It is human nature to forget. It was like the second after you tell someone, a little hourglass is tipped over. After 48 hours, the little white granules stop falling and the grace period for grief ends. Other people stop being extra considerate, and treating you extra nice, and tiptoeing over glossy white eggshells. The sons of dead mothers return to work. The teacher that stopped me in the hall the day before saw me again and asked if I were okay. It meant a lot to me that someone cared enough to notice. For a moment, I didn't feel the grief. The next day, I walked into school and was only met with a single hug. Her life was still over, the last grain of sand fell, and everyone continued on. No one even asked what her name was.

Day 2: I don't know what day of the week it was. I lost all sense of time. Grief tore my heart from my chest and squeezed its claws until clear blood poured from my eyes. I will say only one thing about the funeral. Something I will not forget. The minister remarked how powerful it was that my grandmother learned to say I love you again after her husband, my grandfather, died. My grandmother had 9 kids, 25 grandkids, 15 great-grandkids, and 1 great-great grandkid. Although I still have questions, some of which will never be answered, her love for me was undeniable. Amongst 24 other people, she still made me feel special and for a moment the sky parted.

Week 2: A lot of twos were happening in my life. This was the second week after my second grandparent died. I had two friends on emotional standby who I could talk to and two friends shattered the glass of the hourglass and reached out. And a second teacher reached out in a personal way and it meant the world to me. During Hell Week, when I told them my grandmother had died, I could see the sadness behind this teacher's eyes and I could hear the softness in their voice. They had the look, the look that only someone who understands can have. They wrote me a note and I was reminded that someone could care past 48 hours. Initially, people ask, "Is there anything I can do?" And the best thing people can do is care in the future. In the future, where I'm on the brink of tears and I have enough to fill a bathtub and breathing hurts because missing them hurts and everything hits at once and someone just remembers and reaches out when I wasn't expecting it. I put the note with the objects I gathered in memoriam to both my grandparents and my other dead grandmother that I never met. The card, a captured moment of compassion, sits among objects that captured memories in a happier moment in time.

It's always sparked a dark fire in me when people questioned the quote "tis better to have loved and lost than never to have loved at all." Having loved and lost, to me there is no debate. Memories are broken pieces of stained glass, treasured but painful to hold onto. Yes, it's painful to look at all the happy memories from another time, a world on the other side of the glass, a world I cannot soon reach. Yes, it's painful and life is unspeakably hard but I live with no regrets. I would not change a single thing because for all the nevers I will never have, I have loved. I do not live in fear of death and the inevitable pain it will bring but celebrate life and the time before the end.

Day 1000: Now I walk through the halls and no one knows when I'm thinking of the most intense sadness life has to offer. Whenever I need to think, I stare up at the sky. I see the clouds. Humanity's clouds of grief: floating, dissipating, thickening. I always considered Pennsylvania home because that's where my family is. Home is where the heart is and a piece of my heart is scattered in the wind with their ashes. Death reminds us to live and to say the things we leave underground.

"Why are you sad?"

"It's sickening to have to explain. Can't you just get that grief is a frustratingly internal scar? Time can not heal that wound."

"I'm sad because a piece of my heart curled up and died. And you know what, it sits there weighing on the rest of my heart. It doesn't matter how much time passes, how little or how much I cry, I'm grieving because I loved them and I'll miss them. Love from others and love from them will help and the cloud of grief will eventually be parted by love. But right now I'm sad."

Death. Grief's cruel mistress. I wish I could cross out grief and pain but it's the price to pay for keeping your memory alive. And it's worth it.

Adeline Whisnand

Age: 15, Grade: 10

School Name: St Catherine's School, Richmond, VA

Educator: Seth Martin

Category: Critical Essay

“Thou Shouldst be Living at This Hour”: An Explication of William Wordsworth’s Sonnet “London 1802”

“Thou Shouldst be Living at This Hour”:

An Explication of William Wordsworth’s Sonnet “London 1802”

“London 1802” is a sonnet by the English poet William Wordsworth written in iambic pentameter. Wordsworth divides the poem into an octave and a sestet using a Petrarchan rhyme scheme: *abbaabbacddece*. The opening octave begins with an apostrophe to the 17th-century poet John Milton and continues into the speaker’s view of England and its deterioration. Unlike the octave, the concluding sestet shifts the poem’s focus from the state of England to praise of John Milton’s life and his core values. These two themes come together to detail Wordsworth’s belief that England can be saved through poetry. Throughout the sonnet, Wordsworth employs personification, simile, metaphor, metonymy, apostrophe, and antithesis to convey his views on England’s moral decline and to elevate Milton’s ideals as the key to the salvation of his country.

The tone of the first three lines is pleading as the speaker invokes Milton’s name and soul to aid England, almost like a prayer, exclaiming, “Milton! thou shouldst be living at this hour,” (Wordsworth 1). In the next line, Wordsworth states his purpose for calling on the dead poet when he writes, “England hath need of thee: she is a fen” (2). The poet personifies England as a woman in need of help and also uses a metaphor to liken it to a fen or swamp, an image of foul vapors and darkness. In this line, Wordsworth utilizes antithesis to contrast England as a living person and a swamp full of death and moral decay. The antithesis emphasizes the malignant state both the people of England and the country itself face. The resulting dark and ominous images contrast starkly with the sestet’s imagery of purity.

Wordsworth then elaborates on the cause of England’s degeneration when he states that the nation is full “Of stagnant waters: altar, sword, and pen” (3). In this phrase, Wordsworth employs the use of metonymy to refer to what he believes represents the great cornerstones of England: “altar, sword, and pen”(3) as the church, military, and poetry. Wordsworth believes that England needs to revitalize its crumbling foundation to return to its status as a strong, righteous nation. In the final five lines of the octave, the speaker continues to beg Milton to return certain virtues to England, declaring, “Fireside, the heroic wealth of hall and bower,/ Have forfeited their ancient English dower” (4-5). These lines refer to the values that the poet believes the English people forfeited. Fireside and heroic are associated with warmth and bravery, which England lost to selfishness and greed. Wordsworth believes that the citizens “Have forfeited their ancient English dower/ Of inward happiness” (5-6) in favor of their selfish ways. Then, the speaker proceeds to group himself with the people of England as the cause of the degeneration of the country. Instead of distancing himself from the masses, he states, “We are selfish men” (6). Wordsworth’s inclusion of himself is unusual because most speakers choose to distinguish between those who cause the problem and themselves, but the speaker acknowledges that even he is not exempt from blame.

The final lines of the octave contain a direct request to Milton, and Wordsworth uses an exclamation to emphasize the power and emotion of these lines when the poet writes, “Oh! raise us up, return to us again;/ And give us manners, virtue, freedom, power” (7-8). The line “Oh! raise us up, return to us again” is a request to resurrect England in an almost biblical sense. Like a prayer, Wordsworth looks to Milton’s art and example to redeem his nation. Wordsworth writes as if Milton can save England with just his words; as if Milton is a deity, able to bring England back to her former glory.

Unlike the beseeching tone of the octave, the tone of the sestet changes from pleading to praising, and the focus

shifts from the state of England to the life and work of John Milton himself. In these six lines, Wordsworth alters his rhyme scheme from the normal Petrarchan sestet rhyme of *cdecde* to a more unusual rhyme scheme of *cddece*. Wordsworth's stylistic choice represents Wordsworth's wish to expand the limitations of poetry. Like his poem's subject Milton, who transformed the expectations of poetry by writing an epic in English, Wordsworth uses his poetry as an example of how he believes a poem should be written. In "London 1802," Wordsworth purposely changes the structure of his poem to reflect the revolutionary thinking of Milton and his epic poem "Paradise Lost." By expanding his boundaries, Wordsworth demonstrates his belief that change can be brought about by more than battles.

In the first line of the sestet, the poet writes, "Thy soul was like a Star, and dwelt apart" (9) and again in the following line, "Thou hadst a voice whose sound was like the sea" (10). As in the two first lines of the octave, Wordsworth uses antithesis to contrast the heavens and earth as star and sea. The antithesis emphasizes how Milton's soul and poetic voice come together to create something as beautiful as a combination of both the sea and the stars. As Wordsworth creates this juxtaposition of earth and heaven, the poet alludes to Milton's words being almost like a deity, just as God does not control just the heavens or only the earth, but both kingdoms. Wordsworth also writes in the ninth line, "Thy soul was like a Star," which likens Milton to a guiding light, just as the north star guided thousands of explorers. After equating Milton to a powerful yet soothing sea, the speaker also states, "Pure as the naked heavens, majestic, free" (11). The purity of the heavens directly contrasts with the stinking "fen" in the poem's second line. Wordsworth continues to use antithesis when he writes, "So didst thou travel on life's common way,/ In cheerful godliness" (12-13). Here, Wordsworth contrasts the heavens and earth by calling Milton both virtuous and humble. These two attributes come together to represent how the poet views Milton's life, values, and achievements as the paragon of human life and writing. The poet directly associates Milton with noble attributes, continuing the metaphor of Milton as the redeemer of England. Milton represents both the values of humble rural life and the grace and purity of a saint.

In essence, Wordsworth creates a prayer-like poem to elevate John Milton as an example of the virtues that could return England to its glory and her people to happiness. Wordsworth also uses John Milton's poetic ideas to stretch the boundaries of what many poets considered the most difficult form of poetry to write. Just as Milton succeeded in writing an epic poem in English, Wordsworth found ways to change the rhyme scheme of a Petrarchan sonnet while still staying true to the form. From the confluence of these two themes of "London 1802" comes the idea that England can be restored with the power of poetry.

Hugh Williams

Age: 16, Grade: 11

School Name: Collegiate School, Richmond, VA

Educator: Will Dunlap

Category: Dramatic Script

Two Keys

Two Keys

Characters:

Yaromir, late 20s, officer in Soviet Strategic Rocket Forces.

Casimir, late 20s, officer in Soviet Strategic Rocket Forces.

Setting:

An underground missile facility deep in the heart of Soviet Russia. Sometime near the peak of the Cold War.

(Spotlight on a corkboard with a tac and a nail on it YAROMIR enters and the room lights up, hangs a key on the tac, and sits alone in front of a large desk, with an array of shiny buttons and switches. YAROMIR performs what appears to be standard checks on the array, flipping switches and checking status lights, etc. After a few moments, CASIMIR enters with a large bundle of papers under one arm and a single cup of coffee in the other.)

CASIMIR

(In greeting) Yuri.

YAROMIR

Casi. *(beat)* You didn't get me a coffee.

CASIMIR

I couldn't carry two, my hands are full. *(sarcastically)* I've got some very important documents in my right hand, and well, my left hand had to carry my own coffee.

YAROMIR

Hmm.

CASIMIR

What?! You never asked for one! Why would I get you a coffee if you didn't even ask for one.

YAROMIR

Because I would have.

CASIMIR

(playfully) I don't care what you would have done, Yuri. I don't want to be anything like you; you smell like a pig's -

YAROMIR

- Shut up. *(chuckling)*

CASIMIR

(Laughing) You would think a man as educated as yourself would know how to wash the stench out of his uniform.

YAROMIR

And you would think a man as educated as *yourself* would know how to carry two coffees at the same time. God forbid he use both his hands.

CASIMIR

(Still laughing, sarcastically) Like I said, Yuri, these documents are highly important and confidential. I wouldn't want to risk spilling coffee on them.

YAROMIR

(Picks up and reads the papers and flips it around to show CASIMIR) The most common newspaper in the entire country took priority over my coffee. *(scoffs)*

(YAROMIR slaps the paper down on the desk. CASIMIR disregards what Yaromir says, hooks his key over the nail in the corkboard right next to YAROMIR's)

CASIMIR

Hey, I need to know what is going on in the world. Make sure the Americans haven't done anything stupid. *(he picks up the paper and starts to read)*

YAROMIR

(long beat) Well?

CASIMIR

"Well," what?

YAROMIR

Have the Americans done anything stupid?

CASIMIR

(reading carefully) I... I don't think so... Looks like they finally withdrew from Vietnam...

YAROMIR

(doesn't care) Hm.

CASIMIR

Anyways, does everything look good with -

(Cut off by a flickering and eventual extinguishing of all of the lights both overhead and on the array. A relatively dim red spotlight lingers upon the two men within the small room.)

Apparently not.

YAROMIR

Woah, woah, woah, what is happening?

(Frantically flipping switches and pressing buttons. While he is doing this, the coffee cup rattles and falls off of CASIMIR's desk. The room begins to shake. YAROMIR loses his balance and falls on his back)

Ow! *(Panic)* Casi, what is happening?

(The shaking stops)

CASIMIR

(A little panicked as well) I have no idea.

(The dim red spotlight shoots to a blinding red wash of the entire stage. A loud wailing alarm blares through the theater.)

(dawning terror with realization) That's bad. That's really really bad.

YAROMIR

Do you think that could have been a misfire at another launch site?

CASIMIR

No way, there aren't any others that are far enough away for us to feel it and survive. Anything near here would have killed us. The only places that we wouldn't have died from are East of Moscow, and we wouldn't have even felt them. *(beat)* Shit

(CASIMIR Picks up a radio and starts dialing furiously looking for any kind of signal. A small blip of a man yelling in Russian can be heard for a split second. CASIMIR drops the radio and lunges for his key)

They hit Moscow. The fuckers hit Moscow.

(He plunges the key into the array on the far left side. He motions for YAROMIR to do the same. YAROMIR stands still, his key still hanging)

Yuri, what the fuck are you doing?

YAROMIR

We... we can't... we can't just... we need authorization, Casi. We need orders from Moscow to fire.

CASIMIR

Yuri, are you fucking stupid? *Moscow is gone.*

YAROMIR

You don't know that. We don't *know* that.

CASIMIR

(simultaneously with "we don't...") Did you not hear the man on the radio?

YAROMIR

He didn't say anything about Moscow!

CASIMIR

He said we are under attack by the Americans. Where else would they launch a fucking nuclear attack? Volchansk? The middle of fucking *Siberia*?

YAROMIR

(beat)(bluntly) We need to wait for orders.

CASIMIR

Fuck orders, everyone to *give* orders is dead. It's up to us to protect Russia. To protect our Motherland.

YAROMIR

(defiantly) Russia is not my Motherland.

CASIMIR

(rage) You serve in one of the most prestigious branches of the Soviet Military. You don't get here by accident. You're lucky to have even left Karviná, you ungrateful piece of shit. Russia has offered more to you in the past year than Czechoslovakia could offer you in your fucking lifetime!

YAROMIR

(anger building) There was nothing for me in Czechoslovakia because of Russia! This country is the only reason Czech citizens suffer in the mines and in the factories. Russia has given me nothing. Only taken away my future.

CASIMIR

Your future will be Russia, in Czechoslovakia or all the way in fucking America, Russia will be there. This country is the future. *(remembers why he is even in this argument in the first place)* Yaromir, put the key in the fucking lock.

YAROMIR

If Moscow really was destroyed, Russia has no future. I will not kill millions of innocent people for a cause that is already dead.

(CASIMIR lunges towards YAROMIR, grabbing him by the throat)

CASIMIR

(viciously) I don't give a fuck about innocent Americans! You ungrateful piece of shit, if it weren't for Russia, you would still be deep underground in the pitch black mines, with coal dust coating your black lungs and your bleeding, blackened hands that grasp a splintered pickaxe. Russia saved you from that hell.

(YAROMIR shoves off CASIMIR and pins his back against the array)

YAROMIR

Russia created that hell! Those coal mines serve only to fuel the Soviet war machine and to suppress Czech citizens.

(CASIMIR pushes YAROMIR off of himself, and stands up straight to face him. Neither man has power over the other)

CASIMIR

We are in the middle of a war, Yuri. People are going to suffer.

YAROMIR

Then let the Russian people suffer. The Czechs and Poles and Hungarians, and all the other cultures that Russia has diminished to slaves, they should not have to endure those terrible conditions.

CASIMIR

No Russian should be forced to work in the mines or factories over a Czech or Pole. We conquered you for a reason. You are an inferior people.

(YAROMIR punches CASIMIR hard in the gut. CASIMIR keels over.)

YAROMIR

Show me that I am inferior to you, Casi. I want you to *prove* that I am lesser than you.

(YAROMIR pins CASIMIR on the array again, face first this time, grabbing his arm behind his back and causing him much pain)

CASIMIR

Ah! Fuck you, *FUCK YOU!*

YAROMIR

Doesn't seem like I'm much inferior to you, does it?

CASIMIR

(Screaming) Fuck you, you son of a bitch! I'll kill you, I'll fucking kill you!

(CASIMIR struggles to free himself, one arm gets loose and he reaches for the key on his left, pulling it out of the lock and stabs it towards YAROMIR, cutting into his abdomen. YAROMIR recoils, key stuck in his side, and lets go of CASIMIR)

YAROMIR

(grasping at his side, panting) Ah, shit!

(CASIMIR punches YAROMIR in the face, causing him to stagger and fall to the ground. He then picks up YAROMIR and slams him against the corkboard, with enough force to knock the remaining key off of the hook. He then begins to strangle YAROMIR)

YAROMIR

(gasping) Get the- f- fuck off- o- of me!

(kicks CASIMIR in the groin, causing him extreme pain. YAROMIR then begins to smash CASIMIR's head repeatedly against the ground until CASIMIR stops twitching, for at least 20 seconds, all while both men yell indistinguishable noises and words. After CASIMIR is dead, YAROMIR sits on his knees over the dead man for another extremely long beat, panting. He slowly stands and yanks the key out of his side. It is covered in both men's blood.)

(in pain) Fuck!

(goes and picks up his own key off of the ground with his bloody hand and looks at both, each in a different hand. Lights fade to a spotlight on his hands before blackout.)

(Curtain)

Lucy Wootton

Age: 13, Grade: 8

School Name: St Catherine's School, Richmond, VA

Educator: Julie Elmore

Category: Short Story

The Heartbroken Mother

The Heartbroken Mother

The day has come. Georgia and her family load everything into the car and start heading down the winding, country roads to Camp Forester. It's a joyful summer day with a gentle breeze, sunny glow, and is filled with the impatient excitement for the coming days of summer camp. Each time the car winds a corner Georgia feels as though the roads are teasing her. It seems as though the car ride will never end, but after what feels like the longest three hours of her life, the family arrives. Georgia leaps out of the car, breathing in the sweet smell of her favorite yellow flowers and feeling the rays of sunshine fall through the branches upon her shoulders. She hears footsteps sprinting towards her and feels her best friends, Elle and Annie, wrap her in a big hug. Tucked between her friends, Georgia knows she is going to have one of the happiest and most amazing summers yet! After unpacking all of their belongings in their new home for the summer, the three of them skip over to the dining hall laughing and catching up.

The first meal is a delicious spread of fried chicken, mashed potatoes, green beans, and rolls. Everyone at camp is stuffed in a happy, satisfying way. That night, all Georgia can think of is how excited she is about the coming days of camp, not feeling a shred of homesickness.

The days of camp go by and Georgia feels as though they are running away from her too fast. Elle, Annie, and Georgia have gotten into their fair share of trouble and are having the best summer ever!

On the very last night of camp, the three of them slowly walk towards the campfire, hoping that the time will stretch out longer. Finally, they arrive and take their places around the fire. They sing camp songs, roast marshmallows, and tell ghost stories long into the night. It's a starless night, and they are all sitting deep in the mysterious, spooky woods. After stuffing themselves with s'mores, their counselor, Emily, stands up and announces that she will be telling the most horrific and terrifying ghost story they have ever heard. The wind seems to quicken, causing the branches of the trees to sway in the wind and creak ominously. The fire hits her face, as though giving her a spotlight, and she begins her story.

"There once lived a happy family upon the hill across our lake, Edith Howard and her son, James Howard. Edith would do absolutely anything for her son. When James was about 17 years old, he fell in love with a beautiful young maiden, and the couple couldn't have been happier. However, on one terrible day, James found his beloved cheating on him. Filled with the terrible pain of heartbreak, he was never the same lively spirit as before. Edith's unconditional love for her son caused the pain he felt to multiply within her heart. So, deep in the night, Edith found the girl and was filled with ruthless hatred. Suddenly, the girl was dead and Edith was now a killer."

Georgia gasps with terror, but Emily continues on.

"Legend states that she is still looking for young girls to hurt because of the one maiden who broke her son's heart. It is also said that she is very deceiving and clever, so be warned, and keep your guard up," Emily finishes with a flourish.

"... But why isn't she locked up?" asks Annie, shaking with fear.

Everyone around the campfire leans in, praying that Emily's answer is not as horrifying as they think.

"Nobody could prove it was her" Emily replies mysteriously.

Suddenly, the temperature seems to drop, providing a cold, shivering feeling within them. Everyone is silent. Georgia, Elle, and Annie cling to each other, trying to provide an illusion of safety. Emily, realizing what she has done, hurries to comfort all of the campers around the fire. Soon most have recovered, but all are sure they will have nightmares that night. Realizing how late it is, everyone gets up and starts to head back to camp. As the friends walk back through the woods, they hear a noise. The girls all freeze, listening intently.

"It couldn't have been more than the wind, right?" Annie says nervously.

Nobody answers. Soon they could make out the muttering and putter, putter of footsteps. It sounds as though

whatever is coming is in a rush and worried. The muttering quickens and so does the footsteps, while the friends stand motionless unsure of what to do next. Elle starts to run, Annie and Georgia soon catch on, sprinting after her.

By now, they are completely lost in the darkening woods. It is close to midnight, and the moon is providing little light. Their hearts quicken with each rushed step, hoping that they will come out of this whole. All panting and exhausted they arrive at an old, rundown cabin. It is covered in moss and seems to be rotting away with age. They can hear the footsteps coming closer and decide their only chance is to get in the cabin. The door opens with a loud creak and a groan, and they catch sight of two bunk beds, dangerously leaning towards the walls of the cabin. The three of them huddle together on the rotten wood floor feeling the most fear they had ever experienced. They struggle to stay quiet, especially because their loud panting seems to magnify against the silent night. Georgia feels as though her heart will explode, it's beating so fast. The friends sit silently, listening for the voice and the footsteps but hear nothing. Feeling some relief, they relax their bodies and exhale, but this doesn't last long before they hear it again. The *thing* is coming nearer still.

The next thing they know the door is being opened slowly and calmly, but the friends are completely panicking and frozen with fear. They press their backs against the wall and hold their breath, wanting nothing more than to be peacefully sleeping in their warm beds. As the door opens, the three of them begin to see the silhouette of a short, small woman hobbling in. Annie lets out a gasp. They all freeze, terrified. The lady begins to turn around, and this moment seems to last forever for the three of them. All of a sudden, the moonlight glides through the window and illuminates the lady. She is shorter than them with greying hair and deep wrinkles along her face. She appears to have been once very pretty, but as the years have passed has become weak and old. Georgia thinks as though she looks malicious, right out of a horror film. As she spots Georgia, Elle, and Annie, the girls shake with fear. An unforgiving look crosses her face as the corners of her mouth rise into a horrifying grin. The girls see her crooked, rotting teeth through her hateful smile. All of a sudden, she seems to snap out of it, starting to seem less scary and intimidating.

"What are you lovely girls doing here at this time of night?" the lady inquires, with a raspy tone.

Nobody responds.

"Come on now, don't be afraid."

The girls shake with terror. The old lady starts towards the girls as they push their backs against the wall, trying to disappear. She grabs them with unnecessary force and starts guiding them towards the bunk beds. The girls obey. Now sitting across from the girls, the mysterious woman begins to speak again.

"My name is Edith Howard," she says calmly.

A newfound terror begins within the girls, immobilizing them with fear. Georgia knows she must figure out a way to escape. She begins to think hard of ways to get rid of Edith's grasp. Suddenly, it hits her. She begins to rock back and forth on the rotting, broken bed, hoping that her friends will follow suit. Georgia turns, giving her friends a pointed look. Elle and Annie, thoroughly confused, don't start at first, but soon they understand and start rocking. Edith, bewildered, stands up with authority and goes to grab something out of her pocket. Georgia spots the glint of a blade, but at this very moment, her plan succeeds. *Bang!* The bunkbed crashes loudly. The three girls managed to stand up in between the bunks at just the right time. Climbing over the rubble, the three of them tear towards the door of the cabin.

As the girls sprint out of the shack they hear one last, pain-filled shriek, "Noooooooooooo!"

Not daring to breathe a sigh of relief, the girls continue sprinting up the root-filled hill towards camp. Finally, Georgia, Elle, and Annie see their cabin rising above the hill and feel pure joy and relief, unlike anything before.

Ada Woo

Age: 15, Grade: 10

School Name: Maggie L Walker Governor's School, Richmond, VA

Educator: Cecilia Boswell

Category: Critical Essay

The Hypocrisies Within Zoos

Humans have kept animals confined in enclosures for thousands of years, with the earliest suggestions of zoos appearing over 5000 years ago. It has been evident that zoos originally existed solely for human entertainment, and animals have been barred from the freedom that humans themselves value so much. While visitors enjoy seeing animals on a quick daily excursion with their families, most don't realize the abuse that wild animals experience in zoos. Conversely, zoos have become a staple of animal preservation welfare, and if the existence of zoos perishes off of the world, local economies could be impacted and many jobs would be lost as well. Essentially, zoos should remain open to everyone as long as people all around the world establish a fine line of proper treatment towards the animals, eliminate animal-visitor interactions, and animals should only be kept in zoos if their natural habitats can be closely replicated.

Primarily, in order to keep zoos alive in the world, wild animals brought into zoo confinement must be able to live more freely in their constricted habitats. For example, it has been proven that the lack of a spacious habitat necessary for certain animals such as bears and cheetahs is detrimental towards the animal's physical and psychological health because they are not able to live naturally. Since the animals are deprived from their natural environments, zoos sabotage the natural order as well as the life cycle of various species while in confinement (Isakov 2020). In order to prevent further damage towards these innocent animals, the government should potentially consider providing grants for zoos that are more naturally inhabitable for the animals which would encourage less inhabitable zoos to ameliorate their animal habitats. Overall, the implementation of a quality mindset when it comes to zoos would create more sufficient habitats for animals without completely dissolving them.

Concurrently, in order for zoos to remain open, they should eliminate all animal-visitor interactions. Hundreds of zoo venues across the globe offer one-on-one animal and human interactions where visitors are able to pet, photograph, cuddle, kiss, and sometimes even swim with certain animals. In fact, around 43% of all zoo facilities enable tourists to pet mammals and reptiles, and 23% include hand-feeding experiences, where people are able to provide food and water for the captive animals. Although these one of a kind experiences may be unforgettable and a thrill to visitors, these interactions must be stopped because the zoo animals become extremely stressed from foreign touch, causing them to develop detrimental neurological disorders. Some people would argue that the abolishment of animal to visitor interaction is irrational because this particular public activity plays a key role in contributing to the revenue of zoos. To illustrate, zoos contribute roughly 16 billion dollars per year in revenue, which is a vast amount of economic profit for the national economy (Fuller 2011). However, with the constant wave of tourists, these poor animals continue to be under duress for the entirety of their lives in zoos. Ultimately, in order to eliminate the stress of zoo animals but also preserve zoos, people can create a compromise to stop human-animal interactions.

Additionally, if the world would like to continue to see public zoos in their communities, zookeepers must find a way to closely replicate an animal's natural habitat. Essentially, there are a variety of animals' habitats that are nearly impossible to recreate in zoos, and these animals should not be confined. For example, the Javan rhino, one of the rarest species of mammals on the planet, has very specific requirements for a habitat. It is necessary for these rhinos to live their lives freely in the wild because of their large size and shy nature. Similarly, wild tigers are large cats that are territorial and require vast amounts of land. In fact, most tigers need between 23 and 39 square miles of space which is hard for zoos to deliver. Yet, zoos are getting away with having tigers on the auspice that they are protecting them from endangerment. Unfortunately, there are roughly only 3,500 tigers found within the wild, as there are thousands more wild tigers trapped inside public zoos (Josephson 2018). This statistic reflects on the public's general greed for the revenue generated from zoos, which seems to overlook the fact that these animals would in fact

be better off back in the wild.

Therefore, zoos should remain open only if world leaders establish a fine line of proper treatment towards animals in confinement, stop animal-visitor interactions, and certain animals should not be caged in zoos. Day by day, thousands of species continue to be neglected and improperly treated while in the state of confinement. While the mission of all zoos is to provide amusement and educate the general public, visitors must acknowledge the ramifications as a result of these institutions. The current state of zoos continues to threaten the general welfare and quality of life for millions of animals across the globe. Clearly, citizens and governments must begin to work collaboratively and rectify the present state of all zoos in order to save the animals.