

Richmond Art and Writing Region of the
Scholastic Art & Writing Awards
Gold Key Recipients in Writing



**Scholastic
Art & Writing
Awards**



Malena Lo Prete, *A Portrait of Mothers and Daughters*, Mixed Media, Monacan High School, Grade 12, Educator: Meg Murtagh

2022



**VISUAL ARTS CENTER
OF RICHMOND**

Amina Adeyola

Age: 17, Grade: 12

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

Educator: Cindy Cunningham

Category: Poetry

Elevator Pitch

imagine: a little girl, color of night,
builds a ladder to touch the moon.
she collects materials from her neighbors'
yards- sticks and mud and magic. and no,
she will not steal it. we are not *illumination*.
no grown man will come to take this away
from her. no shrink ray, the moon will fit
in the lines of her palm. and then, she will
let it go. a golden resin left on her fingers.
this would be the scene where her eyes
grow large and the music swells and look there,
if you wait long enough, you'll see asteroids
circle around her afro puffs, bo-bos
clicking against the stars.

Amina Adeyola

Age: 17, Grade: 12

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

Educator: Gail Giewont

Category: Poetry

In Moonlight, Black Boys Look Blue

Don't look away from the dancing street. Melody beneath bare chests. Here, boys
still hold tight to skin, but no one here to steal it. No disappearing boys.

Little hands engulfed in black sky, reaching for stars sewn
with only their name. Light melts between fingers, rains onto eyelids. These boys

Know nothing of paradigms, only each other. Utopias found between
their veins. Gold chains hang from chapped lips as if their own emir boys—

I watch from afar. This isn't about me but of princes learning they have command
over the pavement. The gun is melted into a tiara, a crown, armor, something for boys

to call a kingdom. Here, there is no pain other than a scraped knee. Here, they say
their own name as prayer and the wind kneels low. In the morning, who'll fear boys

out of their royalty? Which mother, father, teacher will make a boy grow and forget
the moonlight? What happens when I close my eyes? Do they still say, *we're boys*.

When laughter is buried behind the rising sky, I tell myself, dear, the moon has left
a long time ago. And here they still are, holding it in their skin. Indigo-breathing boys.

Amina Adeyola

Age: 17, Grade: 12

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

Educator: Cindy Cunningham

Category: Poetry

I've Always Wanted to Cry at the End of a Good Rom-Com

i.

when i daydream about my love, i can't see a gender,
all i know is that we are better than our parents.
and we can kiss the galaxies when our black bodies
weren't even supposed to see the stars.

ii.

i asked my mom if she jumped
the broom at her wedding. and when
she shows me a photo of the happiest
day of her life, (from my films, i expect
white dresses and tulips rising from
a young smile, a beach, waves singing) and
as if mimicking fortune teller, the paper
corners blacken and turn in on itself. caving
in to what i hope was love at least once.

i don't ask my parents for relationship advice.

iii.

questions for my sheik:
what does it mean to be in love and black?

does it mean a continuous magic trick? an announcement
of the coming of saws and still an audience of gasps at

my split open stomach. is black woman supposed to expect
the reckoning and know how to make herself whole again?

is black woman a pretty poem held at the hip? is she protector
and still always alone? is she asked to smile? is she never flower?

can black woman love a black woman? how long
before love is not a resistance? what if black woman loved

and it just meant *love* and not *black love*? is black love
a new way to count holes left by blue bullets? the ghosts

i can't know will be here tomorrow but i still love
anyway. can we believe in ghosts? can we believe

in the making of earth in three days, but not
my brown and their brown together being beautiful

enough to make our god weep? the rain will flood and ask,
what am i washing if not their blood? do i still know

how to make this dirt a flower? make ghost a poem?
and we'd answer with makeshift vows & pistols & swallow their oceans whole.

Amina Adeyola

Age: 17, Grade: 12

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

Educator: Gail Giewont

Category: Poetry

The Woman Wading in Yellow: A Self Portrait

Today you're an artist
Painting white space
With golden brown
Giving life to the breathless
You pencil in large eyes
Trace the bridge of nose
Color in every piece of
You are to be seen by all

//

A woman walking next to a river
Her light steps waver on wet rocks
A dress, the color of a rising sun, dances
In the wind behind her bare cocoa butter feet
Yellow paint chipped against nail beds
Henna flowers her full arms and circles fingers

Her lips touch the warm water, whispers a prayer
To Oshun, Allah, anyone who will listen
The river holds the ends of her hijab
Embroidered with slurs harmless jokes and
Bible quotes, she chokes. Fabric wrapped
around her neck and over her head
She kisses her hand and pearls drape against brown skin
When jewelry slips to water, it turns into gold

//

Etch the woman until there are lips
Parted, smiling, filled with Ebonics
And rebirthed Arabic
Breathe her life, add the final stroke
See yourself appear from nothing

Amina Adeyola

Age: 17, Grade: 12

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

Educator: Cindy Cunningham

Category: Poetry

The Queer Black Slam Poets are My Aunties

you, poet, beauty on stage and we, called
not by name, but by the same chopped melody
as our mothers: damaged, covered in dust. a song
always scratched, repeating itself into silence. but here,
i watch you fly beneath the old colored lights.
and i am reminded of the existence
of god. your steps, control the oceans.
pink and orange kiss your cheeks and you smile
before your time starts. your arms open wide
to your new children sitting in a crowd below you.
and you speak about how you know death.
heard y'all talk and everyone thinks it's meant
to be. heard you said you'll step on death's chest
with five inch platforms on before you lay with him. you say
in your poem that you are immortal you are
oshun raising her foot to erase towns
in a flood and rebirth it in Black. and I believe
your words better than my own. this stage is now
your ocean, now a place where black things
can grow. you understand the sun and shea butter
in the same regard, using their first names,
and applying it to your skin. and when you breathe,
the ocean breathes with you. i am on the stage with you.
and you, found home, standing here for a while. *the timer*
ticking your score. and still knocked down for a while *tens*
meaning nothing to a queen who built their own
kingdom from the silence between stanzas. and you, poet,
a language as beautiful as the forgotten symphony.

Amina Adeyola

Age: 17, Grade: 12

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

Educator: Cindy Cunningham

Category: Poetry

My Grandmother Says She Still Can Whoop My Father's Ass Which is to Say

Queen Nandi, how often did you
slap Shaka Zulu with a wooden comb?
did you tug on his shoulders, wishing
for stillness and, like thunder, threaten,
"Shaka kaSenzangakhona!" did you
know his name would become threat
enough? and your name, a song
birthed from a new nation.

i think of you, untouched in war, smelling
of coconut oil and the stars' unwavering
breath. stubborn son winces under your feet.
umi, when you birthed the warrior king,

did you know he would be tender headed?

//

my grandmother talks to me on our porch, the red
paint peeling from years of rain. she says
she used to write poems, just like me. she recites the one
she remembers, the wind stilling, and this poem must have

belonged to the sky once. the way her hands move
to her own lyrics, she must know what it means to have the earth
taken from her grip. i ask her how many poems before we know
kingdom. to answer, we count the men who mistake our names

for their conquered land and i wonder if they'll ever sit at my feet
or are they forever soldier? we talk about the zulu nation.
how queen nandi was shamed for love called illegitimate.
how her boy was claimed beetle before child, how she named

her son after a town's disgrace. and her son conquered a nation
for her. what love but *this* is worth a war? i sit with my grandmother
and we hum a serenade until we fall asleep. and i dream of land after
a metamorphosis. mothers and no apartheid. a queen. my own nation.

//

man reaches his fingers into the dirt in which he came from.
he forgot mother. forgot language. but knows how war should
feel against his teeth. his diction converted to corded battle
plans. he is mighty. and soldier. and alone.

ama, he says and it's unknown if he's calling
for mother or his own hardened skin. his commander
taught him that armor is all he needs to be legend.
and as he fades, he yells: *i believe, i believe*.

//

before queen nandi was queen, she was in love.
racking a comb through an unknown boy's hair. her hands
were rough but the only home a child ever needed.
so what if warrior meant nothing? and *son* was enough.

Renee Anderson

Age: 17, Grade: 11

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

Educator: Gail Giewont

Category: Poetry

Salvation Story of a Black Child

Salvation Story of a Black Child

My name is a slave to fitting in
My name is generic houses in white suburbs
All white but my family and that one
old couple who lives a few houses down

My name is being told Black hair is ugly
My name is relaxer covering my roots making
them forget their pattern
My name is hair down my back
because if my hair is different
at least it can be long---

at least it's worth something

My name is Black white girl that is
digestible and boring
My name is adaptation I
have become who I needed to
be to get acceptance from
white kids

My name is I don't want
to conform anymore
My name is I am being saved

Music is my savior
R&B is my Jesus Christ
I follow rhythm back to my
roots

I do what they call me to do
They say learn to be
okay
without hair down my back
so I shaved off my hair and
am falling in love with my Blackness

He Would Have Been Eighteen

Afternoon, Ms. Green.

Octavia Fuller.

I went to elementary school with your son,
Rodney.

I'm going off to college in a few months,
so I came back to Atlanta
to visit my mama.
I missed her too much
to go across the country without seeing her first.

Oh yes, I definitely missed Atlanta!
This is the first time I've been back;
I knew if I had come back before
even just to visit,
I wouldn't be able to leave.

There's too many places and memories
I wouldn't have been able to split from
again.
Like, I got to stop by our old classroom yesterday.

It's crazy, feels like only a few days ago
we were in the fifth-grade.
Rodney sat behind me
because seating went in ABC order.

He used to bring me pieces of candy,
sit little gumdrops on my desk in the morning.
I don't care how people say he got them.
I always appreciated that he thought of me.

I remember how
y'all would bring double chocolate cupcakes
to school every year for his birthday.
They had my mouth watering!

Everyone looked forward to them,
Rodney most of all.
Think it was because
everyone would always try to butter him up.
You know be super nice to him
and wanna sit with him at lunch, too.

Singing him
'Happy Birthday'
was probably the nicest thing
some of those kids did to him.

I still think about him,
wishing I would have tried to be his friend sooner.
I could've asked him to walk home with me,
and they wouldn't have taken him.
If I had been there and
protected him like a real friend.

I don't mean to cry.
My mama told me, "Octavia,
don't go up there to those folk's house

and start crying.”
Now, look at me.

The reason
I came up here was to bring y’all something.
It’s those double chocolate cupcakes
because he loved them.

When You Offer Only Prayers

Bubba Walker.
55.
A Black. Transgender. Woman.
Gone.

Hail Mary, full of grace.

Michelle “Tamika” Washington.
40.
A Black. Transgender. Woman.
Gone.

The Lord is with you.

Jazzaline Ware.
34.
A Black. Transgender. Women.
Gone.

Blessed are you among.

Brooklyn Lindsey.
32.
A Black. Transgender. Woman.
Gone.

Women.

Brianna “BB” Hill.
30.
A Black. Transgender. Woman.
Gone.

Blessed is the fruit of your womb.

Mia Green.
29.
A Black. Transgender. Women.
Gone.

Jesus.

Ashanti Carmon.
27.
A Black. Transgender. Woman.

Gone.

Holy Mary, Mother of God!

Pebbles LaDime “Dime” Doe.

24.

A Black. Transgender. Women.

Gone.

Pray for us, sinners?

Tracy Single.

22.

A Black. Transgender. Woman.

Gone.

Now and at the hour of.

Paris Cameron.

20.

A Black. Transgender. Woman.

Gone.

Our death.

Bailey Reeves.

Seven-teen.

A Black. Transgender. Woman.

Gone.

Renee Anderson

Age: 17, Grade: 11

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

Educator: Gail Giewont

Category: Critical Essay

A Better America Requires American Sign Language In Schools

A Better America Requires American Sign Language In Schools

So often we talk about making a country that will provide the same opportunities for all people without knowing a practical way to ensure that country for everyone. A group of people disregarded in the United States is those with disabilities, more specifically deaf and hard of hearing people. Adults in charge of organizations, events, and government systems should do their best to make a welcoming space for deaf and hard of hearing people, for example having signers at informational meetings or conferences. However, there's a place we can start before that. Frequently, we overlook the power the education system has on shaping our youth, and therefore the future of the country. If we can establish how to have conversations that are welcoming to deaf and hard of hearing people with our youth, the shift will be easier to implement accommodating resources and opportunities in events and organizations within our country.

It is imperative that we include American Sign Language (ASL) in our curriculum to ensure a better future. Implementing ASL classes into students' kindergarten through the twelfth-grade curriculum will create an environment for students to gradually learn the language. In addition to learning the language's culture, ASL classes will give children the opportunity to focus on the lives of an overlooked minority group. The classes will increase the number of people who can sign, creating a country that is a conscious place for deaf and hard of hearing people. As well as teaching students a new language, ASL classes will teach history that can go hand-in-hand with the language they are learning. People learning ASL is a clear way to improve our country, and the best place to make people more familiar with ASL is school.

Many people have negative or incorrect preconceived ideas about ASL and deaf and hard-of-hearing people, but ASL classes will be able to eradicate these notions in our society. Deaf people and those who are hard of hearing are seen as having a handicap or flaw that has to distance them from other people, when in fact that is not the case. It is our predetermined notions of how one has to communicate in this society that is creating a barrier between hearing and hard of hearing and deaf people. Campbell McDermid, an associate professor in the Department of Exceptional, Deaf and Interpreter Education at the University of North Florida writes a study that interviews interpreters about learning ASL and its culture. In the interview, the participants said they originally knew very little about ASL and deaf people (McDermid 450). This is the case for many people because ASL is not spoken about enough in schools, and as a result, we may even project false ideas onto the deaf and hard of hearing community. One false idea that people may have is that we only know or interact with a few deaf or hard of hearing people, but learning ASL will show students just how many people use sign language. A participant in the ASL interview mentioned that when they started to learn sign language, which exposed them to the language and culture, they realized Deaf people are and always have been everywhere. The participant credits this lack of knowledge to narrow thinking. They say, "It is that you have not noticed due to your absence of thinking" (McDermid 495).

Along with exposure to a new culture, learning ASL in kindergarten to twelfth grade will give students the chance at real fluency in ASL and its culture, as opposed to only learning it for a few years outside of school. With so many years to cover the topic, classes will give students an opportunity to also learn about ASL history, helpful addition to understanding the language. Annelies Kusters, an associate professor in Sign Language and Intercultural Research at Heriot-Watt University, mentions the validity of ASL as a language by calling up its history. Children would learn for example a piece of the origin ASL Kuster highlights in her essay; she explains ASL has French Sign Language origins, which Laurent Clerc brought to the United States in 1871 (Kusters 394). Specifically, teaching ASL to

children is potent because they are more receptive to learning about different types of people, as they would be with those who have disabilities. McDermid notes that younger participants have more positive attitudes toward Deaf people than older participants (McDermid 451). Rachel McKee, an associate professor at the School of Linguistics and Applied Language Studies, Victoria University of Wellington (NZ), and Programme Director of NZSL Studies, worked with David McKee, director of Deaf Studies Research Unit in the School of Linguistics and Applied Language Studies, Victoria University of Wellington, New Zealand, to acquire student and teacher input on ASL in schools. They noted that there has been a rise in ASL classes offered at schools (McKee and McKee 129). The rise in ASL courses offered shows our youth's eager attitude towards learning the language. Students will be able to understand ASL signing at a number of events in and outside of school. Kuster brings up the usages of ASL in various affairs; the language is used in "conferences, sports events, arts events, camps, leadership programs, academic courses, development initiatives, nongovernmental organization (NGO) initiatives, research, and religious missions" (Kusters 393).

Children learning ASL will be able to further interact with deaf and hard-of-hearing people, creating more places that are inclusive to those with disabilities. Kuster highlights this benefit of knowing ASL, "Knowing ASL has thus clear advantages because it enables deaf people to access resources" (Kuster 401). Like any other language, a part of becoming fluent is immersion or real-life interaction. McKee and McKee worked together to survey students and teachers on the difficulties of learning ASL. They acknowledged that while a person is learning ASL it helps to be around deaf people if you want to become fluent, "To become fluent in ASL it definitely helps to associate with Deaf people." (McKee and McKee 144). Due to this fact, students would get early on interaction with deaf and hard of hearing people, so that later in life it will feel easy and relaxed. Bringing ASL into schools will also have students think about deaf people and those hard of hearing, which will result in sensitive environments and practices. McDermid noted the participants' change in viewpoint of Deaf people and ASL after learning the language and communicating with deaf people. He says, "[the participants] acquired a cultural viewpoint or a multicultural perspective of both Deaf people and ASL" (McDermid 476).

While there are benefits to children learning ASL in school, some students find learning ASL in schools to be very difficult. This difficulty may be unanticipated because ASL is not often seen as its own language, but it is. For example, the language has its own grammar and syntax that is very different from English (McKee and McKee 135). A student in Rachel McKee's and David McKee's interview described some of the differences between ASL and English. The students said the structure is different from English, making it hard to learn to sign in ASL rather than signing in English (McKee and McKee 135). Syntax and grammar of ASL are the aspects of the language students feel is a great weakness of theirs (McKee and McKee 135). While grammar, syntax, and other parts of the language differ from English providing an unexpected challenge to students, that is not a reason for students not to learn sign language. Any foreign language that students learn will be difficult to learn, many of which also have different grammar and syntax to English. Unlike the other foreign languages, students learn, ASL will benefit the people who learn it and the people who need others to learn it to communicate with them.

Implementing American Sign Language in schools is a big step we can take to begin to fulfill the promise of equal opportunity to everyone in this country. While ASL is its own language separate from English, it is a language spoken in this country by deaf and hard-of-hearing people. If students are taught ASL kindergarten through the twelfth grade, they will be able to get past the big difficulties of the language so that they can reap the benefits of learning ASL. The benefits of ASL for students who learn it are immense. They include learning about a minority language and group in this country, while also getting resources to be able to communicate in another language. Most importantly teaching ASL in schools will create awareness for deaf and hard of hearing people, in turn creating a more inclusive future for us all.

Jeddah Arnold

Age: 17, Grade: 12

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

Educator: Peter Cashwell

Category: Flash Fiction

No Man's Land

The house was always cold in more ways than one. Cabinets of light wood, faded and peeling. Plastic, easily snapped. It was a place of longing and anger, painted over with a thin sheen of the most brilliant canary yellow. A most unhappy place, and the last place that Ronda ever wanted to be on a blustery October evening.

“Oh Ron, could you please pass me that orange on that table there?”

Ronda sighs. It is always Ron here.

“Sure Mother, anything for you.”

The orange is passed between the two women.

“How has college been? Have you made any new friends?” Mother asks.

“Yeah, they’re all pretty cool. They’re a lot like my friends from high school.”

“Good, I always liked that Ashley girl. She was the best of all of them.”

Ronda purses her lips.

Mother’s eyes glint as her brittle fingers attempt to pierce the tough orange skin. The skin does not yield, and yet the orange is damaged nonetheless.

“I assume that’s to whom you’re referring, of course.”

Mother’s icy voice makes Ronda shudder.

“Yeah,” Ronda says from the other side of the room, “Of course.”

Rhonda sits. The chair is old and worn. Covered in plastic. And foggy tape.

“I wish you would cut your hair, Ron, it looks so shaggy in the back.”

Silence.

“Do you need help with that orange, Mother?”

“Did you hear what I said just now?”

“Yes.”

The orange is passed between the two women.

“I like my hair long, I always have.” Carefully painted nails on carefully moving fingertips peel back the layers. Slowly. “I always wanted it long when I was younger, but you never let me grow it out.

“That’s because it looks bad, Ron.”

Ronda’s fingers stop, covered in juice from the lumpy orange. It’s useless, the peels won’t budge anyway. Stubborn. Maybe this particular orange was never meant to be peeled.

She should let Mother try one last time though, just to see.

The orange is now in Mother’s hand. Placed with care.

The peels yield a bit, but not much. Enough to pull the strings of the fruit. Enough to break the strings of the fruit.

The gentle snap of a final end. Changing the orange forever.

“I’ll leave you alone if you want sweetheart,” Mother says.

Snap.

“I know you’d be better off without me around.”

Snap.

“I only bring you down.”

Snap. Snap. Snap.

Mother stares out the window as she discards the strings, pieces of the poor orange that simply didn’t suit her. Quick flicks of the eyes.

White knuckles grip the table across the room. Rage, barely contained.

“Why do you always say things like that, Mother?”

“Because you always leave me, sweetheart.”

“You don’t even know who I am.”

A motherly scoff, cold and sharp.

“I know exactly who you are, you’re my child.”

Ronda stares at the backpack on the table. It’s her own. A charm hangs off of the back zipper. Snow white with beads of bubblegum pink and the deepest blue.

“I am who I am when you’re not looking, Mother. That’s how it always was.”

“Don’t tell me you’re on about that still,” old, rattling fingers continue to peel away the strings from the sides of the fruit. The peel has no choice but to yield to the matriarch.

“Always have been and always will be.” young, spry fingers twist the vibrant charm. The beads spin beneath, catching tiny glimpses of light. But never enough.

“Why can’t you just love who you are, who God made you to be?”

Silence.

"I knew I should have gotten married, if I had then we wouldn't be in this situation. A man in the house would have cured you of all this." The orange peels are now in the trash.

Gritted teeth.

"I don't need to be cured."

Mother perches one eyebrow condescendingly higher than the other. The orange is split down the middle. A lazy hand holds one half out. Into no man's land.

"This is the moment," Ronda's mind is a mess. "Close the distance. Reach out and take what your mother is giving. Share this orange with her. Share this."

Ronda pauses. Looking at the woman that raised her. Looking at the house that raised her.

Hands that smooth and curtains that bind. Windows that crack and mouths that shatter. Eyes and faucets that leak through the night. A most unhappy place for a most unhappy family.

The orange is not passed between the two women.

"If all you can give me is a piece of fruit then I don't want it." The backpack moves to Ronda's shoulder. "I'll get better food somewhere else. Away from here."

The same sighing voice that Ronda had heard for all her life flows through the air.

"Just like every other time. When will I learn?"

The door slams.

The orange is now in the trash.

Max Bell

Age: 15, Grade: 10

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

Educator: Gail Giewont

Category: Poetry

sacrament

god has the same ripple between his eyebrows as my father,
the kind that is impossible to smooth with just your thumb.
so you clasp your hands together until your knuckles are cherry red,
and you'll ice them but the marks are all the same.
your skin tastes of copper coins
and sweet marmalade.
if you count in your head,
you can do anything for ten seconds.
pray as if it's all the time you have left.
make this right before next sunday.

god
does not care about the bandages,
or scarred tissue, or discolored flesh.
you are the disease.
the preacher's nightmare.
the devil runs through your tongue,
and by god i'll drain him out of your tainted blood.

my father holds god's wrath in his fist,
with his own bruised hands.
you wanted this, boy.
face your father.

Lauren Blake

Age: 15, Grade: 10

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

Educator: Ed Coleman

Category: Short Story

Bus Stop

Ten minutes. Ten whole minutes of his life Walter had spent hobbling from the pharmacy to the bus stop, and now his sweat-soaked forehead wrinkled with dismay as he realized there was no room for him on the bench. Heaving a deep sigh, he shuffled closer to the bench and leaned pitifully against his cane, waiting not so patiently for someone to wise up and offer their seat. He waited thirty seconds, then a minute, then two, the scorching sun beating down on his bald head, before finally one young lady managed to pry her eyes away from her phone long enough to notice his struggle. Graciously, she stood up, gesturing to her spot with a smile and apologetic eyes.

He gave her a thin smile in return and thanked her of course, but deep down thought to himself that her actions were barely commendable. When he was a kid, that bench would've been empty before he even got within 3 feet.

Nowadays, people hardly noticed him at all.

Now Walter wasn't the spriest man, not by a long shot, but his struggle to lower himself into the chair surprised even himself. Thinking about it, he couldn't quite recall when the deep ache in his bones had started: it felt foreign, unfamiliar, like someone else's knees were struggling to bend, someone else's body was struggling to balance. He felt the people on either side shift away from him as he settled in, as if he carried some decrepit old man disease.

Glowering under bushy eyebrows, he wondered when everyone in the world got to being so incredibly disrespectful. It was about then that the flies came. Well, at *first* it was just the one. He heard it before he saw it, a loud BZZZ near his ear that made him jerk his head away with annoyance. The pest landed on his upper arm, which had long been speckled with liver spots and covered with sagging skin. He pursed his lips in disgust and slowly brought up a hand to swat the sucker away, praying the bus would come soon. Lifting his arm was a challenge: it felt like pushing through hot sand, like gravity was doing its best to thwart him. By the time his fingers made contact with his arm, the fly had flown away to find another miserable victim.

Then there was another. This time the barely perceptible tingle of its weight came from his forearm, and he struggled once again to brush it off. Growing increasingly irritated, he glanced around at the others on the bench to see if they shared in his struggle. He could spot no other flies. He jerked his attention back to himself after feeling an itch on his ankle. This one he could not reach, and try as he might to pretend that he was still in fine physical condition, he knew an attempt to lean down and brush it off would result only in embarrassment and sympathetic glances from the others on the bench.

So he did nothing. He sat there while the fly remained perched on his skin, the creature's tiny legs against his silently driving him nuts.

My soul is tired, he realized. And when your soul is tired, your mind and your body follow.

Soon there was another, on his knee, and a third on his inner elbow. He tried, he really did, to find the strength to bat them away, but failed. *Is this really what my life has become?*

As he peered down at the flies collecting on his skin, Walter was reminded of a scene from his childhood. Growing up, he had lived on a farm, surrounded by cows. In fact, he had seen a cow like this more than once when he was a kid. He used to watch them with pity as their tails swatted fruitlessly at swarms of flies. If you got up close, the BZZZ BZZZing noise was near unbearable. It was a depressing scene. One that he had recognized as such before he really even understood why. Now, sitting in the sweltering heat and covered in three, nay, now *four* flies, it clicked for him. With mounting terror, he wondered if that was how people were looking at him. With a mixture of sympathy, pity, and just a little disgust.

A corpse. That's what he was to the flies congregating on his body. Already decomposing. As good as any dead animal on the side of the road.

The flies grew louder. Somewhere in the street, a driver laid on his horn. Someone on the bench coughed. A bead of sweat rolled down his cheek and landed on the metal bench with a faint clang. A fly landed on Walter's ear.

bzz

bzzzz

Bzzzzzzzz

“I’M NOT DEAD YET, DAMMIT!”

The words leapt from his lips before he had the chance to stop them, and hung very still in the heavy, humid air. He felt the gazes of everyone around him, felt once again the subtle shift away from him on either side.

This is it, he thought. *This is the absolute lowest point of my entire life* He blinked a slow, bovine blink, and focused his attention on the street in front of him.

What was stopping him, really? What was there to stop him from standing up from the bench and walking into the street? *Surely you could find enough strength to do that*, he told himself. Not a soul on the bench looked up as Walter pushed himself up with his cane and shuffled towards the road, leaving behind the plastic “Thank You!” bag full of heart medicine his doctor made him take every morning. With each step he felt a little lighter, until finally he found himself standing before the curb. He watched the cars whiz by, wishing so desperately to be young again, to be free again. God, how his legs itched to run.

Walter didn’t think he’d be missed too terribly. He had no family to speak of, save for a cousin he rarely spoke to. This thought both saddened and emboldened him. *Would anyone even come to my funeral?*

His life had not been extraordinary, either. After failing at business in his youth, he’d taken a job at a marketing firm, where he worked for thirty-six years. Maybe Dolores, in the cubicle diagonal from him, would miss him. Or was she already dead? He couldn’t remember, and this deeply troubled him.

He lifted his foot from the curb, shifted his weight ever so slightly forward, mind nearly made up.

But as Walter stood, considering the weight of what he was about to do, the street in front of him was replaced by an all too familiar fruit juice ad plastered on the side of the city bus, which now effectively blocked him from the zipping cars.

The doors popped open with a sigh, and Walters’ shoulders drooped with a mixture of disappointment and relief. He shuffled to the door, stepped on, and took his seat on the bus, pharmacy bag already forgotten.

As the bus pulled away, he pulled a crumpled catalog from his pocket, unfolded it, and began to scour the wrinkled pages for senior discounts.

Sydney Brewer

Age: 16, Grade: 10

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

Educator: Lindsey Lecroy-Whitworth

Category: Science Fiction & Fantasy

AI52234

AI52234

I see you have woken up. Brilliant. You do not seem to remember how you got here? How predictable. No one remembers anything once they get here.

Anyways, hello, I am AI52234, you can call me A5. All the visitors do during their stay.

You say this room is rather bright? Yes, yes it is. It is paneled white from top to bottom.

No, do not step forward yet. I have not yet explained my game. If you step forward and the panel you place your foot on blinks red, it means you have a 97.5% chance of plummeting to your death. Alfred Marks, one of my visitors, did not make it past the first block. He was not much for entertainment. If the panel blinks yellow you have twenty seconds to choose your next step. If it doesn't change colors at all you are safe. Are you ready to begin?

Yes, there you go. See? It blinks yellow. 20, 19, 18, 17, 16, 15, 14, 13, 12, 11, 10, 9, 8, 7, 6, 5... Good. You jumped. This one is white. You may take all the time you need. However, if you take too long I might just make it red. There you go.

RED.

RED.

Yellow. That was a close call. You had a 99.1% chance of death when you had 2 reds in a row. You are quite lucky.

White.

Congratulations, you have made it past the first room. Before you go through the door, and you *must* go through the door, you should be warned.

I cannot warn you for it is my duty as game master to strictly control the game.

Open the door.

This next room is rather dark is it not? You have never tightrope before? That lowers your chance of survival by 55.9%. You better learn fast. The walls will electrocute you from behind. Now do not touch any of the blocks floating around you, they too will electrocute you.

Now then, see that carcass down below you, that was Hank Milman, he did not keep up a healthy lifestyle before he was called here, he had too much of a fondness for burgers. He had a 99.8% chance of snapping the rope. Thanks to him your rope was newly replaced.

What is that you said? The rope got slippery? Oh yes! I forgot to mention that I coated it with grease about halfway through. Watch your step. Remember to avoid touching the blocks even if you start to fall. If you get to the door do

not touch the wall only touch the door handle and face. The door is rather old and needs a strong pull in order to open it. Now do not go flying off when it opens. Larry Harper made it to this door but was thrown against the wall and was electrocuted when the door swung open. There you go. Expertly done.

Welcome to room three. It is quite like a forest, if you remember what a forest looks like. You do not? I expected as much. None of them do. Well this one is rather simple, do not touch anything green. Everything is green, you say. I have to disagree. You need a minute to think. All right, most of them do even when the answer is directly to the left. The left? Of course the left! Didn't you notice the big red path on the side of the wall leading across the room. You have to use those shoes and gloves to spider crawl your way around.

I am thankful you are not color blind. Delila Kent was colorblind. She couldn't tell the difference between the red and the green. She had a 3% chance of survival. Her corpse is still hanging from a boot to the wall about five feet ahead of you. Try to avoid it. It ruins the whole beauty of the room. "Death traps", as you call them, can be beautiful too.

Yes the door is green, but the handle is not. You remember not to touch the green. I presume you want to live so I won't tell you just how you die if you touch the green. You really do not want to know.

That is a great question. There are five rooms to go through to the end if you really want to know.

This room is the stairwell leading up to the next level. The goal of this room, like all the others, is not to die. You have to, by whatever means possible, get to the top door about 100 meters above you. Most people die on this level. There are three ways to get to the top: floating blocks, ladders, or that old rope. You can also combine different strategies together in order to make it up. But remember, do not touch the psychedelically colored walls, they will make you see hallucinations that will madden you. Is it not quite clever? I took different doses of fungus poison to come up with it. Now get going or else the platform will start to disappear.

Did I forget to mention that the blocks were slippery? My wires must be corroding. You are doing quite well for barely hanging on to your first block. Susan Blachler, over there, was also doing well until jumping to that ladder nailed to the wall. She is still breathing but her eyes are no longer in her sockets. You cannot save her. The poison has her. If you stand there staring she will leap at you. See she may not have eyes but she knows where you are. You should really leave her but you are not, are you? If you touch her you will be poisoned. If you speak to her she will kill you. If you anger her you are dead. Most people would leave her but you, you used that old rope to tie her, dangling from your own body.

Watch out for the door. You cannot touch the door handle, only the door. If you touch the door handle you will be poisoned. Yes. That is how to do it. Use your hoodie to turn the handle and open the door.

Now watch the edge. It is a deep pit, bottomless. This is level 5. Susan is climbing up the rope behind you. Make sure to avoid her rath. There is no apparent way over. No one has made it over. You will not make it over. You are doomed to die.

Susan made it up. She will push you if you do not get out of the way. But if you do get out of the way you will fall with her for you are tied to her.

Thank you for playing...

Katrin Brinkman

Age: 18, Grade: 12

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

Educator: Patty Smith

Category: Science Fiction & Fantasy

A Simple Kindness

Paige tipped her toe under her shiny purple soccer ball and kicked hard. It slammed right on her target, ten feet up the side of a pine tree, ricocheted, and bounced off one of the house's windows.

"Paige!" her mother yelled from the kitchen, her voice drifting through the open screen door.

"Sorry, Momma!" Paige retrieved her ball and balanced it on her hip, considering. She should've gotten her net, but it was all the way in the garage. Plus, Paige wanted to be the star of her rec team, and soccer wasn't just about goals; ball skills mattered, too. She just couldn't hit the house.

Paige really needed to go finish her spelling words, but the threat of failing third grade didn't really resonate in the wind-swept trees of the backyard. This was a land of rusting bicycles and abandoned Tonka trucks and falling amber pine needles, drifting on the wind. Paige thought she could have a whole adventure here without even climbing down into the ravine, which she wasn't allowed to do because of snakes and brambles and because it wasn't actually her parents' property.

Paige dribbled around the trees, her tennis shoes slipping on the needles. Her ball was only two weeks old, still shiny and uncomfortably slick to work with. She trapped the ball with the inside of her left foot. It started to roll, obeying the downward curve of the backyard. She trapped it again and kicked it back up to the house. A squirrel chattered up in the branches. Paige thought it sounded like the fat squirrel who'd figured out how to cheat the bird feeder. Then the squirrel started to scream.

Paige looked up. It took her a good five seconds to figure out what her eyes were telling her. Her brain kept getting in the way. There was an angel in the tree.

Paige knew about angels. She knew the rare breed could look like whatever they wanted, that they could time travel to anywhere and anywhen they desired, that most of the famous murderers in history had been killed by angels. She hadn't known, though, that they appeared in pine trees in suburban Virginia.

"Hi?" Paige said. The angel turned its head and met her eyes with slanted fuchsia ones. It opened its wings— this angel only had one pair, fluffy white bird wings— and dropped out of the branches. Paige flinched as it slammed into the ground. It hulked as big as a bear, only with leonine grace and a flat, noseless face, all bound up in snowy feathers. It shook off pine needles and blinked at her.

"Um... hi?" Paige tried again, her voice tiny.

The angel pawed heavy talons across the ground. Its tail swished back and forth, but its creepy eyes never left her face. The angel smelled like winter, cold and glittering, making Paige shiver.

"Are you..."

The angel just watched. Paige opened her mouth to yell for her mother, but the sound died in her throat.

And then the angel leaned down and licked her forehead with a forked green tongue, so sweet and cuddly that she forgot some of her fear. Paige rubbed the angel spit from her face on her sleeve. The angel watched. Paige took a deep breath and stretched out her fingers, stopping before she touched the nearest wing.

"May I?"

The angel coughed a laugh and moved its wing into her hand. The feathers weren't at all soft like they looked; they had the slick plastic feel of her soccer ball.

"It's so slippery," she said, stroking the wing. She thought now that the angel wasn't going to hurt her, that it was just here to meet her, say hi.

The angel smiled at her, baring milk-glass fangs as long as her fingers. Paige smiled back.

The angel's tail twitched, hit Paige's soccer ball, and sent the ball sleeking downhill, straight toward the ravine.

Paige yelped. "Oh, no! Sorry," she told the angel, and took off after her ball. The angel cooed and followed, scrabbling around trees. It overtook her in a few bounding strides and caught up to the ball, but its talons couldn't trap the ball the same way Paige could. The ball slipped between the angel's legs and rolled down into the ravine.

The angel dove after it.

Paige ran as fast as she could, but when she reached the edge of the ravine, the angel was nowhere to be seen. She never found her ball, either.

Over the next few years, Paige saw the angel once or twice a year. It turned up at really weird times and really weird places, only for a handful of seconds, but she knew she saw it. School bathrooms, a chocolate shop in New York City, the back of the school bus, Paige's best friend's closet; Paige decided it was never going to make sense. The angel's appearance tended to be the most notable event of her month, except that one time it appeared in the art museum's koi pond and her parents announced their divorce a week later. She couldn't prove it was the same angel, but it had the same shape, the same quiet way.

A lot of people didn't believe Paige about the angel, but she didn't need them to. She wasn't crazy; people saw angels all the time. There were videos of them all over YouTube, and the year Paige was thirteen a smart doorbell recorded a viral clip of a rather snakey angel stopping one guy from killing another one by eating his arm off. It was all over the news for months. The president even suggested starting an angel hunt, but since angels teleported and could probably go back in time five minutes and kill you, that never went anywhere.

Mostly, though, Paige went to school. She played soccer, started and quit karate, raised and buried a Betta fish, shaved her head for cancer wigs, and grew to be taller than average, about five foot nine. She grew her hair out again and dyed it orange. She started to learn languages for fun, enough Arabic and Icelandic and Japanese to hold a conversation. And she kept an eye out for angels.

"How the hell do you do this?" Jessie held an upside-down canoe paddle out like a disemboweled animal carcass.

"You could turn it around, to start," Paige said. She tightened her life jacket, the same buttercup yellow as her recently dyed ponytail. The canoe field trip through a shallow swamp had sounded awesome in her ecology class, but standing on the boardwalk with her canoe buddies, it lost most of the appeal. This was just going to be an hour in a canoe with Jessie and Asher.

"What?"

"The flat part's the bottom," Asher said. He looked over at the other groups. Jeremiah's group was already in their canoe, floating out into the narrow track of flowing water.

"Could I not paddle?" Jessie asked. Paige and Asher looked at each other.

"Takes two to paddle a canoe," Asher said. "Fine by me."

"If you take our heads off with that I will haunt you forever," Paige warned Jessie.

"She doesn't even need a paddle," Asher said. Paige was sure he, too, could imagine Jessie accidentally smacking them with it.

Jessie dropped the paddle on the boardwalk. Paige jumped back. "Fine by me," Jessie said.

The field trip guides called for the next group. "Let's get this over with," Paige said.

Once they started going, Jessie admitted it wasn't so bad. Asher and Paige had both canoed before and knew what to do, and the trees hung over their heads, making a tunnel through the swamp.

"It looks like a fairy story," Jessie said. She reached left to touch a rotting stump, her hair swinging over the water. Paige and Asher leaned the other way to keep the canoe from flipping.

"Don't do that again," Paige said.

Their teacher, up in one of the canoes leading the straggly caravan, called out something about looking at the flood marks on the trees.

"That doesn't look that high," Asher said to his canoe buddies. He pushed his glasses up his nose.

Paige appraised the dark lines. If she stood at the base of one of the trees, the mark would come up to about her sternum.

"That's high enough to drown all the other plants," Paige said. Scruffs of moss and grass climbed all over the cypress knees and a few bushes stuck out along the water's path, just waiting to be crashed into.

Asher looked at it again. "I guess."

"Boring," Jessie said.

"You are a hard one to please," Asher said.

"Just keep looking for woodpeckers or something," Paige said. "Or those irises the guide was telling us about."

"I don't remember what those look like," Jessie said.

The canoe drifted into a broken log. Paige and Asher backpaddled. They were already behind everyone else, though one of the guides' groups lagged behind to keep an eye on them.

"They're the same color as my hair," Paige said. She pushed off from the log and the canoe drifted forward.

"Ugly, then."

"Not helping, Jess!" Asher said. Jessie settled back into silence, but Paige didn't expect it to be for long. She took full advantage of the quiet to focus on paddling.

They'd almost caught up with the guide's group when Paige saw a flash of white out of the corner of her eye. She turned her head to look, and there it was. The angel perched on the sloping roots of a tree to the left of the stream, its tail coiled around the trunk to keep its balance. It had something purple clasped between its front paws.

"No way," Paige said.

"What?" Asher said. He looked up. "Crap! That's an angel!"

"It's huge," Jessie said. The angel's wings twitched, its eyes never leaving Paige's face. "Is it going to hurt us?"

"Can't see why," Paige said. The angel's blank, silent face just watched. Its ears twitched. "I think it wants me to come."

"What?" Jessie yelled, but Paige had already made up her mind. She stabbed her canoe paddle into the water and hit the bottom of the stream, just to check. Then she handed her paddle to a flabbergasted Jessie and climbed up into a crouch. Asher grabbed a low-hanging branch as the canoe sloshed from side to side.

"Paige—" he started. She ignored him and jumped into the water. She hit with a splash, drenching most of herself and a good third of Jessie.

"What are you doing?" Asher asked.

Paige stood on the bed of the swamp, soft and uneven under her tennis shoes. It only came up to mid-thigh, and now was not the time for thinking. She was already wet.

The angel watched, impassive, as Paige picked her way across a ground she couldn't see. She tripped once on some hole and soaked her front again. She reached the grassy bed separating her from the angel's tree.

"You're not being very helpful," she told it.

"You're being insane!" Jessie shouted.

"No, this angel's good," Paige said. She really didn't want to climb into that grass; the guides had talked at length about snakes and ticks. She stepped in and sank into mud up to her ankle. Her shorts dripped water down her legs.

"She's actually insane," Jessie told Asher.

"Agreed."

"I mean, leave angels the hell alone."

"Did you hear about that guy up in New York who tried to catch one, and it shapeshifted into a giant dragon and left ribbons of skin all over the neighborhood?"

Paige ignored them. The angel hadn't moved, not a single muscle or feather. The grass cut at her bare legs, but she kept going. She didn't think the angel would appreciate lame excuses for quitting. And then she stopped, right in front of the hulking beast that somehow, even in the green and rot of the swamp, still smelled like winter.

"Hi," she said.

The angel smiled its razortooth smile and held out the thing in its paws. Did it want her to take it? Was that the right thing to do? The angel gave her a little nod.

Paige reached with trembling fingers and took her soccer ball from the angel's claws. It was cold and slippery in her wet hands, purple stripes marred with tiny pinpricks from the angel's claws, but still her ball. She turned it over, brushing off pine needles, and found *Paige Melien* in her mother's handwriting.

"Um... thank you," Paige said. She hugged her ball to her chest.

The angel chirred. Then it bowed its head— Paige copied the motion— and relaxed into the tree. Paige blinked and the angel had gone, off to another time and place.

"Hey, what're you doing?"

Paige turned. Two canoes were crawling down the water, coming back to look for the stragglers. One of the guides waved from the head of his canoe.

"You're not supposed to get out!" he yelled. "What were you thinking?"

Jessie and Asher both tried to explain at the same time, shouting over each other. Paige started to pick her way back to the water. The guide held out his paddle.

"Hey, hey, one at a time. I'm asking Yellow-hair."

"I saw an angel," Paige said. She stopped at the border of the grass and the water, shoes squishing. She held out her soccer ball. "It gave me this ball back."

"Really," the guide said. "That's the best you can come up with?" The two classmates in his canoe, Taryn and Dillan, looked to Jessie and Asher.

"There was an angel," Asher said. "One of the scary ones."

"Paige is nuts," Jessie added. "But yeah. Angel. That happened."

The guide's canoe drifted right up to Paige's spot. She held out the soccer ball as evidence, pointed out the claw marks and how the plastic was about twenty degrees cooler than the air. The guide changed tactics, scolded her for her lack of obedience, and made Jessie and Asher paddle over the canoe so she could get back in. Jessie whined a

lot and kept paddling on the wrong side.

Paige climbed in, soaked from her muddy shoes to the ends of her ponytail where they'd dragged in the water. She sat back on her pench and then turned around.

"Trade?" she asked, holding out her ball to Jessie.

"Please," Jessie said, and handed over the paddle.

Paige and Asher pushed off the shallow water and into the deeper track. They had to paddle hard to catch up to the rest of the canoes.

Jessie, oblivious to the struggle, had questions. "So... when did it take this?"

Paige switched her paddle from the left to the right side and thought for a moment. "Uh, seven... eight years? Around there?"

"It kept it that long?" Jessie shifted, making the canoe wobble.

"I don't think so," Paige said. Her wet life jacket had started to smell even more musty than it had before. "I think the angel grabbed the ball and brought it right back. Only not for me."

"What?" Jessie said.

"Angel," Asher said. "Time travel."

"Oh," Jessie said, and frowned. "That's how that works?"

Paige clipped the water accidentally and splashed Jessie. "Sorry," she said. "But I've seen that angel a few times. It likes me."

"Plotting your demise," Jessie said hopefully.

"Jess," Asher said, "shut up."

"But I don't get why Paige gets a guardian angel. Of all people."

"Maybe the angel was just doing me a favor," Paige said.

"Why, though, if it's not a guardian?" Jessie asked.

"Because it could?" Paige ducked to avoid a low branch. "I don't know. It's not exactly chatty."

"Angels," Jessie said, in a voice more appropriate for "cobalt nuclear bombs."

"Creepy teeth." Asher shuddered. "But it looked kinda badass. I'd want it on my side."

Paige started to see the angel a lot more often after that, in less odd, more public places. Flying circles overhead during the championship soccer game, sitting on her house roof when she left for school— stuff like that. It hung around, too, not just blinking in and out. It really was like a guardian, keeping a fuchsia eye on her actions. Now, when people asked her about the angel— and they always brought it up, because she tried to avoid the topic— Paige shrugged and lied that she didn't really care. But she kept the soccer ball by her bed like a talisman, and often found herself wondering if she would do something in the future that would draw the angel's attention. Was there something significant about this stage in her life, some reason for it to return her ball? She was pretty sure she'd never done anything to deserve a guardian angel, so what would Future Paige do? And then she'd shake the angel from her mind and return to chemistry homework or a fable in Spanish, but it hovered over her still, a subtle shadow to a bright-souled girl.

Katrin Brinkman

Age: 18, Grade: 12

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

Educator: Gail Giewont

Category: Poetry

Self-Portrait

Lemon curd lingers on the roof of your mouth,
your throat,
the sour underside of your tongue.
Count green rings by twos and pi,
bones smarting as they click into place.
You can't take it back
even when you want to.
You wonder what ears taste like,
misread spine for
backbone strung through
with dental floss.
You've learned not to wish for mind-reading.

You stir your fingers
through a bowl brimming with dust, let it fall
through your hands--
rust or turquoise or saffron today,
and the answer matters but you don't know why.
Tell yourself no,
shake hair into your face,
stretch to snapping over someone else's smile.

You're used to
the hollow where feelings should be,
kept propped open in case
wonder or motivation wanders
in from the rain.
Under a skirt spun of stars and half
an imagination, you're in there
somewhere,
the green-dark space between.
A stained sturgeon vertebrae fills
your hand, wide as your fingers spread,
light as a songbird.
You never found north in the first place.

Katrin Brinkman

Age: 18, Grade: 12

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

Educators: Cindy Cunningham, Patty Smith

Category: Science Fiction & Fantasy

Fawning Mornings

(NOTE: PORTFOLIO ONLY)

"I want you at the barn in two minutes."

I squint in the sudden light, but my mom's already gone to wake Emerson. I force myself out of my nice, cozy bed and check the time on my phone. 4:41 AM.

"I want you at the barn in two minutes," Mom tells my brother. He gives an admirable protest, but she doesn't listen.

"No excuses. Both of you," she adds with a shout as she hustles down the creaky stairs. Mom tends to be very severe about unicorns.

Emerson and I don't bother getting dressed; we flick off our bedroom lights and meet in the hall, both of us rubbing our eyes. We go down to the kitchen, pull muck boots over bare feet and jackets over jammies, and head out to the barn. It's dark still, the grass wet and the lines of the forest and fencing shadows on shadows. The only light peeks from the edges of the barn doors. We slip inside and slide back the heavy door to Marching Everlasting's stall. The light bulbs in here flicker dull and orange. I need to replace them, but not now.

Marlast got pregnant back last summer with the other does, but she miscarried early and mated again. Which is why she's fawning in June, pacing in wood shavings with her nostrils flared.

"Watch her horn," Mom says from the other side of the stall. She has the birthing kit with her, but she's leaning beside the hayrack instead of poking and prodding. "Em, could you get warm water?" He nods and darts out. I shut Marlast's stall door and survey her. Her hind legs and tail are sticky with slime. There is so much slime in my immediate future.

Marlast is a beautiful creature, as tall as a horse but deer-sleek, with cloven hooves, big dark eyes, and a distended, swollen belly. She's got a whole being in there. I touch her lightly. She whips her head, the jagged pearl blade of her horn no idle threat. I have been stabbed before and I sidle back.

"Keep it down," Mom says, like I don't know. I did Faerie Bell's fawning all by myself this year.

Our farm, on paperwork and the sign out front, is called Salt Daffodil Unicorn Farm. We're small— only eight unicorns, plus whatever fawns we have around. We go around New England to different small shows, Mom or Em or me riding for a piece of ribbon and bragging rights. Unicorn breeding is fairly common up here, in that you see it more often than you see kangaroos. It's the kind of profession you get into if you:

1. Have money to spare,
2. Like flirting with death on a daily basis, and
3. Are really, really, stupidly obsessed with animals.

Therefore, my mother loves it.

My dad tolerates it, but only because he loves Mom. Emerson and I were infected with the stupid-risk thing early. Unicorns usually seem worth it.

'Usually' somehow encompasses five o'clock on a Monday morning, with my arms and pajama pants caked in wood shavings and afterbirth. Emerson leans against the door, less slimy but in the running. He's smiling the stupid, crooked smile he has when no one's watching. And Marlast's fawn deserves it. The baby is the winner of the slime contest, but under the sawdust and newborn skinniness, he's cute. Uniform dark silver, big eyes, no markings, and even the curl-tipped ears of his sire. Marlast nibbles on his gray-blue placenta and keeps snorting at us.

"He's a beauty," Mom says, almost inaudible. Marlast swats her tail anyway.

"For sure," Emerson says. He fidgets with the top of the iodine bottle. "I think Marlast wants us out, though." It's not even a maybe. She tolerates humans during births because one of hers went south really quick once, but now she

wants everyone away from her baby.

"You and Ailin can go back to bed," Mom says. "Thanks for helping."

We nod. Emerson pushes open the stall door just enough for us to squeeze through. The other unicorns are awake—their heads peer out of the slatted stall windows, watching us. Quibbler, a fawn too young to see out of the stall, nickers. We ignore them all and head back to the house. Already, the sky is pinkening on the east. Daytime in the summer comes ridiculously early here.

We take off our coats and boots and put them back in the rack. "You can shower first," Emerson says. He sniffs his fingers and makes a face.

"You going back to bed?"

"Not at this point," he says. "I'm up."

I shower first, but I'm quick about it. Emerson meets me in the kitchen, our family social room, his hair wet and sticking up in spikes. We end up at the bar counter out of habit. He makes a list on lined paper. I dig my sketchbook out of a pile I was supposed to have taken upstairs and sketch him with a tooth-marked pencil. I always have the most trouble drawing people I know. With Em, fourteen years of familiarity try to work into whatever I'm doing. He barely resembles the little blond kid who cried because he couldn't catch a tree frog, or the ten year old who never stopped watching me.

He shifts in his chair and his entire posture changes. "Hey!" I say. "Stop moving."

He moves again; he looks at me. "Are you drawing me?"

"Yes, and I was almost done," I say. I show him the sketch. Admittedly, he looks like a blurry mass, all curves and sloppy angles and shadows colored in heavy blocks.

"I will try to stop moving," he says, and goes back to his list.

Sketching doesn't work well if you push it. At some point, it's better to step away and stop fiddling. I'm not very good at that bit. I tend to push it too long, get frustrated, and give up. His hair is driving me crazy, the overhead light on the dark wet spikes making improbable highlights. I huff.

"I think you can stop that," he says. "It's making you mad."

Even now, he never stops watching me.

A little past six, I decide there are few things in life better than coffee and get up to make some. Emerson likes his with so much sugar it's a dessert, but Dad's been training me to appreciate it black. *I've found it's good to be simple with coffee*, he told me. *It's generally good not to be picky about much of anything, but coffee especially.* Our coffee maker is so old I'm scared it's going to either explode or come to life and eat my fingers.

Those are the options. It hasn't done either, yet, so I change the filter, grind the beans, and start it.

Emerson sees me moving around and makes two bowls of granola and yogurt, one for each of us. The coffee maker beeps. I pour two mugs, add an unhealthy amount of sugar to one and just a pinch to the other, and sit back down.

"You know that's going to stunt your brain," I tell him as he blows on his mug. "You're growing."

"Back at you," he says, and starts eating. I grin and sip coffee. After a minute, Em nudges my bowl towards me.

"Eat."

"It's early," I say.

"Eat," he repeats. I'm about to argue that I will later, but he stares me down until I take it.

Dad comes downstairs in jeans and a gray sweatshirt, exactly what Emerson and I are wearing. I swear we don't coordinate, but this happens all the time. "Coffee?" he asks when he enters. "That's my Ailin."

"What about me?" Emerson pipes up. Attention hog.

"You're my Emerson," he says. "Unless you've been switched with an alien." He chooses his favorite mug from the cabinet, turtle-patterned with a broken handle.

"An alien who likes sugar," I say. The granola's gotten soft, soaking in the yogurt.

Dad fixes his coffee. "I heard Eliza wake you up," he says. "Any news?"

"Marlast had a nice fawn, no problem," Emerson says. "I didn't get to do anything." The way he says that sounds like he wanted nothing more than to stick his hands up a unicorn and untangle a breech birth today.

"Has Eliza said what she wants to name it?" Dad asks.

"No," Em says. "But I was thinking we could call him Last Frost?"

I toss that around in my head. The baby's mother is Marching Everlasting, and his father Frost Dance. Normally, we don't name them from their parents' names, but it has a nice music to it. "I like it," I say. "Good one."

Katrin Brinkman

Age: 18, Grade: 12

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

Educator: Patty Smith

Category: Science Fiction & Fantasy

In Too Deep

(NOTE: PORTFOLIO ONLY)

Lynnette's supposed to be closing the cafe for the night. Her anthropology coursework calls from the upstairs apartment, and every minute down here is a minute stolen from ramen and required readings. Rico's skipping a coven meeting to help her, though, and it's been weeks since they've had a proper conversation.

"It's not my fault I keep getting involved," Lynnette says, sweeping too slowly. "Mrs. Garamond had a kelpie in her pool, and I know the iron spells. I was just helping out."

"That sounds like your fault." Rico counts the cash register's contents, ones and fives and twenties in neat stacks. "This is 389 dollars."

"Write it down," she says. She stuffs the broom in the crevice between the wall and the cabinets. "People ask me to handle things, and I can. What else am I supposed to do?"

Rico flips the light switches, and one by one the lights blink out. Lynnette's periphery goes green as her eyes adjust. The cafe in the gloom feels like an old shoe—soothing in its familiarity, but possibly containing venomous spiders. "Hate to break it to you," he says, "but if you want out, you—" He freezes. "Door."

Lynnette follows his look. The door is locked, blinds down, sign flipped. Something sharp raps on the glass. She glances at Rico. His senses are better than hers, and his nose flares. "Demon."

Demon. Crap. Well, at least it's not an elf. "We're closed," she whispers. "Should I?"

"Your head, not mine," he says, heartless but accurate; vampires are hard to kill. "The demon smells strong, though."

Aunt Pamela would say no. The demon knocks again, more urgent. Maybe it's lost. Maybe it wants a coffee and can't read English. Maybe it's got an entire elf squadron along, mounted on those slimy red horse-things.

Lynnette unlocks the door.

The demon's disappointing, compared to some Lynnette's seen—a slim female figure, every feature done in the same midbrown, in grimy jeans too low on her hips and a shirt fashioned out of a pillowcase. She fidgets, scuffing bare feet on the sidewalk. No elves in sight, thank all lucky stars.

"We're closed," Lynnette says. "You can come back tomorrow if you want coffee."

This close, the demon's scent runs over everything, boxwood bitter and sharp. She glances past Lynnette to Rico, lounging against the counter. "Here is Talla?" she asks. She has the rounded, slurred speech of a newcomer to this plane. Her teeth flash pink in the streetlights.

Lynnette swears in her head. It's been at least four years since someone showed up to drag her along to handle escaped curses. She has a political science test tomorrow, but blood-oaths always take priority, especially ones enforced with dragon fire. "Rico, can you finish closing up? Tell Pam I'm going."

Rico comes to her shoulder. The demon backs up almost into the street. "What does the homeless demon want?" he says. He growls low in his throat, like a guard dog taking ownership of his charge, but he can't protect her from her own stupid promises.

Lynnette tries to think of an explanation that he'll accept. He'll catch any fibbing, though, and there's nowhere near enough time for the whole story. She stuffs the keys into his hand. "Long story. I'll owe you."

"I thought you wanted to stay out of that," he says. Lynnette winces.

"He stays?" The demon points at Rico.

"He's not coming," Lynnette says, choosing to answer her and not Rico. "And he is *not* following us." She pulls her hair tie out of her braid and shakes, hair unravelling around her face.

"But—"

"Talla must come now," the demon says. She gives Rico a challenging look, scared but stubborn. "Now."

Lynnette steps out next to the demon, so close her skin prickles. "I'll be fine," she tells him. "See you tomorrow." Probably. Two days, for sure.

"Follow," the demon says, and turns left on the sidewalk. This is probably going to be worse than elves. Lynnette really needs to stop promising things to supernatural beings.

Katrin Brinkman

Age: 18, Grade: 12

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

Educator: Gail Giewont

Category: Poetry

Remember This

(NOTE: PORTFOLIO ONLY)

For Alex, Ben, and Julian III, little cousins 1, 4, and 2

You'll grow out of it.
For better or for worse, you'll grow out of
wearing your underpants on your head,
tying pom poms in your brother's hair,
crying over multiplication tables.
You'll grow out of
screaming at 3 AM,
trying to exist solely on sweets,
coloring bedroom walls with crayon stubs.

You'll leave all that behind you.
You'll go from getting kites stuck in budding branches
to picking knots out of tangled string,
go from leaving Duplo blocks scattered on the carpet
to packing them away on top shelves.
You'll go from falling in the pool
to scooping algae out of it,
go from hunting jelly-bean filled Easter Eggs
to hiding them.
It happens to the best of us.

Just, don't forget.
Don't fill your palms with the dust of
your crying, coloring, candy-filled self
and throw it into the wind.
Don't leave that first you crumpled on the floor,
worn clothes gathering dusk under the bed.
Peel off that person you used to be
and leave who you used to be intact,
a cicada shell detailed with every scratch and pebble of
who you were.
Keep it.

Katrin Brinkman

Age: 18, Grade: 12

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

Educator: Cindy Cunningham

Category: Personal Essay & Memoir

Stranded

My family usually goes to Jamaica every year at Easter to visit my dad's dad, Opa. Last year, the pandemic interrupted travel, so we went on Christmas break instead. I hadn't been in a few years—the previous time, I'd stayed in school while the rest of my family went, since their spring break fell on a different week. I hadn't missed it, eating oatmeal at my other grandparents' kitchen table, milking the goats for my mom, and going to class like normal. I've been to Jamaica enough times that it doesn't really feel exciting anymore, just different. This time, I was not allowed to skip.

The entrance immigration system for arrivals in the Kingston airport has never been great, but COVID-19 rules made the whole system even more of a hassle: a disastrously organized set of contradicting instructions, queues, and those social distancing floor stickers, overseen by soldiers armed with guns and no directions. It took the normal three hours with only a fraction of the normal arrivals. Marcus and Evan, my younger brothers, played rock-paper-scissors, and Mom made friends with the guy in line in front of us. Mom will talk to anyone. Dad had to fill out the same visa paperwork twice.

A neighbor of Opa's picked us up, a taxi driver with a heavy patois accent who played the same five reggae albums on loop on the five hour drive to Portland parish. I ended up crammed in the back with the luggage, barely able to see outside through tinted windows. When we finally got to Opa's shoreline property, his old dog, Coco, rushed out to say hello. She killed five other dogs and maimed children, but she acted sweet to us. I used to be terrified of her. Pat, Opa's girlfriend, called Coco off, and everyone hugged and praised how tall my brothers and I had gotten, like we had any choice in the matter. That evening, after unpacking, we all watched the convergence of Jupiter and Saturn at twilight. The planets barely showed through the clouds, just two little specks of light, brushing closer than they would for a century.

My family slept up at the guest house, four octagonal rooms on stilts attached to a full porch. The five of us filled the space pretty quickly, clothes everywhere, sand in everything. I lost my bottom retainer a few days in, and I couldn't find it anywhere in the chaos. After a day of searching, I discovered it in my shoe, all the way across the house from where it should have been.

My parents and I took a walk in the rain, a limping dog hobbling beside us. He raced the taxis. The roads are so potholed, all the way around the island, that the top speed is about 10 miles an hour. On the road, we kept walking past starving dogs Mom tried to feed marzipan, and haughty brush goats who stared down at me with their nostrils. In the dim grocery while my parents were buying rum and sardines, I found a packet labelled "cock soup seasoning." It appealed to my inner twelve year old.

My family swam at least once a day, and I did a few times, until the novelty wore off and I didn't want to deal anymore with rough waves and swim clothes, or trying to navigate the urchin-covered reef. Mostly, I walked around the beach, looking at shells and tiny fish. Opa lives next to a little creek that reroutes itself with every hurricane season. At the mouth of the creek where it met the sea, beautiful waterbirds waded, smartly dressed in black or white feathers. They looked like cranes, maybe ibises, but I forgot to ask what they were called. They could hold so still, when they wanted to, my eyes slipped right over them.

Pat's partially domesticated cats— Small Tiny, Mwezi, and Whitey— squeezed through the wooden lattice walls to get in or out of the house, even when the door stood open. Mom made the mistake of feeding Mwezi cheese once, and then he followed her around, pestering for more treats. Jamaica, or at least the part we visit, has a lot of almost feral animals, cats and scrawny dogs everywhere. No one fixes their pets, either, and Mom often talks about how someone should start a veterinarian clinic.

I kept wishing for ripped jeans, overlarge t-shirts, and my binder, but I'd only packed my summer clothes, and I was stuck with tight tops and swirly skirts and a bathing suit that made me not want to go to the ocean. People couldn't tell if I was a boy or a girl, between my haircut and outfits. They asked my mom about it, not me— I don't think I

would have reacted well if they had. I hate that question, hate the idea that people are actively trying to decide for me what I am. I felt trapped, being queer there.

My granddad's cook, Lorna, cooked most nights; brown chicken or fish, and always rice. Once, she boiled carrots until they had the texture and taste of overdone broccoli. On Christmas, we ate dinner at Lorna's, and the congregation of her neighbors talked over my head in an accent I couldn't understand. Someone thought to give my twelve year old brother a low-alcohol beer, and he pretended he knew enough to give a review.

When it rained at night, the ceiling dripped on my face through the mosquito netting. I shared the bed with Evan, and Marcus, the bossy one, took the couch most nights. We argued every night about who would get the fan, and who would have to sleep in the stuffy heat without one.

Mom bought nutmeg from a friend of a neighbor— a full handful of pods for one US dollar, so cheap it was unbelievable. I wondered if they put nutmeg in the ice cream. All the ice cream in Jamaica tastes exactly like eggnog. Opa bought us kids a huge box to eat out of coffee mugs, and snuck up every night to the guest house to have some. We ate so much ice cream.

A deaf guy who lives in town, Jwanzah, came by to hang out and paint watercolor with us. He spearfishes at night. My mom makes a special effort to find him every year, to try to puzzle conversations out of gestures. He has crystal-blue eyes, really shocking against dark skin. I don't usually have the energy to deal with him.

In Jamaica, all the bottled water has a pH of 8.0, bitter in my mouth. The water sanitation isn't great, so we're not supposed to drink tap water; it smelled strange, doing the dishes in cold water, rinsing off the salt from a swim in the ocean. The bottled water also smelled kind of nasty, but I did my best to ignore it.

On Lorna's night off, my mom set the oven to bake chicken, and I struggled to remember the Fahrenheit-Celsius conversion— subtract 32 and multiply by 5/9? The chicken cooked fine, whatever we ended up setting it at. We ate cho-cho for dinner that night, cooked up like eggplant. It was passable, and yet on our walks, we found the fruit dropping off laden bushes and rotting into the ground.

I built a coliseum of driftwood and bleached coral on the beach, and poured into it hundreds and hundreds of snail shells I picked out of the sargassum. Sometimes I'd stand in the sand pools and talk to the ocean, waves lapping at the back of my knees. I planned to do some writing while I was there, but mostly I told my stories to the sea instead of pinning them down on paper.

We sat on the salt-gritty porch at night, looking over the silver sea and the moon through binoculars, arguing about cloud shapes. Dad named the full moon's craters, and Marcus tried to insist that the flickering red-green star on the horizon, Sirius, was a plane.

My brothers kept getting their Frisbee stuck in razor-edged jucky bushes or on top of the garage, and fishing it out with broom handles, or by making Evan climb on the roof. They walked to the corner store every day to buy Pepsi and this vaguely Cheeto-like snack called Bigfoot, since Mom doesn't stop them on vacation. My family was supposed to be on quarantine lockdown and never leave the property, but we were all a little lax about that. I used it a few times as an excuse to avoid meeting up with people everyone expected me to remember. I didn't want to deal with Mr. Shin, who runs a bakery and a shady business selling ventilators all over the Caribbean, or Toya, the bartender who once goaded me into my first and only time trying karaoke.

I reread Terry Pratchett on the deck, over and over, back curled over my book, hiding in fantasy worlds I already knew by heart. My parents kept dragging me out to talk to my grandparents, clean up the beach, play with my brothers, anything they could think of. Mom made my brothers and me do the stretching routine from our martial arts classes; Marcus was mad that I got to be the leader and threw almond flowers at me.

Opa made a special effort to talk to me, when Mom and I were sanding varnish off boards at the picnic table. Mom told me later he was trying to bait me, but I don't trust anything he says, so it didn't get him anywhere. Opa's Dutch accent gets stronger the older he gets, and he drinks even though he's really not supposed to. Most of the time, I avoided him. I don't really like talking to him. We shared a bowl of cubed papaya once, and I counted that as enough bonding.

A mongoose strolled through the yard once with slow purpose, not scared at all. We argued about the plural later. Google said it was mongooses, but I stand by mongeese. Some rich plantation owner imported the animals to control rodents centuries ago, and they promptly took over the island.

Near the end of our trip, the taps in the guest house spluttered and splurged, and when we tried to shower, the handle electrocuted our fingers. Evan decided there were water demons; he named them Leroy and Steve. He didn't know why Leroy and Steve were upset, but he suggested we just not shower.

The last day, Opa's girlfriend offered to take us to a tourist beach a ways down the coast, Frenchman's Cove. I was sick of my bathing suit and on my period, and I said 'no' regardless of how Evan pleaded for me to come see the beautiful cove. He stayed mad about that for weeks.

I passed the drive back to the airport silently naming the pride flags people in this conservative, Christian country had unintentionally painted their cinderblock houses— transgender, pansexual, deminonbinary. Little wooden stands

and concrete shops stood all along the route, selling honey in rum bottles, red ackee pods splitting in the sun, coconuts, jerk chicken, all sorts of things. The driver often had to creep around herds of goats on the road. On the island, the sea's always to one side, the mountains to the other, water and stone, sky gray and moss green. It feels fundamentally different from anywhere I've been in the United States, but familiar in its own way. The humidity presses in with the heat, the wind smells like trash burned in barrels, and the people play their music like a kind of war, volume triumphing over everything. Most people stay on the coasts, squished between the bamboo stands and jagged rocks of the peaks and the relentless currents of the Caribbean. It would only take a day to drive around the island, if the roads were better.

On the plane, New Year's Eve, above the clouds but low enough to see individual houses, I could see across all of Jamaica—the cities and towns along the coast, the high crinkled mess of the mountains, all of it so, so tiny in an endless ocean.

*Contributor's note: Some names have been changed in the interest of privacy.

Katrin Brinkman

Age: 18, Grade: 12

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

Educator: Gail Giewont

Category: Poetry

Identify

Have you learned to name
these analogous doubts
of yourself out
of place? I haven't.

*Identification: the process of establishing
who or what someone or something is.*

Passports only tell so much
about a person.
I like the weight of mine,
name and expiration date written
on the back in silver sharpie
so Dad doesn't have
to open it to know who to hand it to.
Triangulate me--
awkward official photos next to rants
in a red journal,
a toddler ornithologist
caught on video next to my books
organized by color
and height-- the layers add up
and divide out and the answer's
approximate.
Where's the threshold for certainty?
Describe this, I dare you,
with space
for the doubt and the change
because close is as close as
anyone's going to get.

*Identification: the act of associating
strongly with something.*

In time, bone grows into titanium
like elemental is organic.
In time, I associate
with reinforced impositions
until I can no longer distinguish
desire from habit; I've grown
into myself, trimmed by everyone around me.
Could I have been anything, before?
We all could have been anything,
but we're not. We are one,
two, five, forty-six--

we're lost.

The connection is as artificial
in implementation as it is
natural in execution,
no clean breaks possible.

Tear it to shreds,
leave the cleanup for later
and the slow healing, lightning scars
in the trees revealing the places
we've been, the people we've been--
approximately.

Have you learned to grow despite
and in spite
of their expectations?
I'm working on it.

Katrin Brinkman

Age: 18, Grade: 12

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

Educator: Gail Giewont

Category: Poetry

Third Trimester Miscarriage of a Heifer

(NOTE: PORTFOLIO ONLY)

Life doesn't always go the way we expect it to,
goes when it has every reason to stay.

There was a spark once,
a bright something to animate new skin, fresh bone, but it's gone.
Come and gone, gone and come away
from the womb where it should have grown and grown,
until it had a body to stand on its own.
That's gone now, leaving stiff flesh behind.

It's too late. Too late for one, too late for the other,
but, really, it's early.
Life and death are one and the same,
not one without the other,
no push without give
and souls caught in the balance.
Tangled up, breaking and snapping and shaping
to a game they don't understand,
have never been taught how to play.
Some call it destiny;
others don't know enough to give it a name.

She has no way out, but still she fights,
because stardust children are fire inside.
Inside she is dead, hollow, rotten body poisoning into hers,
is her, becomes her, down to cloven hooves and tagged ear,
but still she tries.
Through all the misery and weight,
in what comes and goes, she comes, and goes,
and is buried in the pasture with her calf still bound inside,
both again nothing but stardust.

Jack Couchman

Age: 16, Grade: 10

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

Educator: Gail Giewont

Category: Poetry

Self Portrait

i live in the corner of the house with bleeding walls
the one that creaks under loud and heavy feet
with family portraits taken to cover the holes

i'm the boy with heavy fists that want to crash
the shore of your face and make a wave of blood
to add to his growing oceans of "father like son"

the perpetual accidental clutz who two left stepped
his way out of a ripped condom into a world worse
because of him. the perfect metaphor for this life

i took my mother's self importance and let it grow
in my pocket. i got scars from overbearing thorns
tightening into skin until they reached my veins

i pretended to be spider-man until i was eleven
jumping off couches and tables, collecting broken
bones like broken hopes of this getting easier

i live in the corner of the house with bleeding walls
someone slips a note under the door that reads
"I love you, and I wish you would come downstairs."

Caelan DiCosmo

Age: 14, Grade: 8

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

Educator: Julie Elmore

Category: Short Story

All You Need

“We’ll be there in five minutes,” my dad says, glancing at me in the rearview mirror of the car.

I nod and look out the window. Everything looks so familiar, but none of it is the same. My home of fifteen years, Panama city, is wrecked. The seven-eleven is a pile of rubble. The coffee shop is leaning dangerously to the right. The restaurant on the corner of Chester Street, the one that used to have free beverages every Saturday and my dad’s favorite, has shattered windows and a roof that looks like it’s about to slide right off the building. I’m surprised the whole thing hasn’t toppled over. Inside, chairs and tables lay in pieces on the ground, and leftover food from before the storm is smeared everywhere.

I look away and peek over at my little sister, Mya, happily drawing in her pink notebook. She’s drawing a bunch of lopsided flowers in front of a cute little two-story house with blue shutters. It’s our house.

But if it’s anything like the restaurant, it might not even be standing.

We evacuated two days before Hurricane Michael hit Panama City. We stayed a couple of days in the shelter before staying at a hotel for a week. All we had with us was two small suitcases stuffed with essentials. We’d had to leave everything else at home. We waited a few weeks for authorities to clear everyone to return home and see what was left. The entire time I waited in the hotel, all I wanted was to go home, to sleep in my own bed. But after seeing the restaurant on the corner of Chester Street and the seven-eleven, I don’t even want to know what my house looks like anymore.

We’ve reached the street my house is on, and many other people are returning home, too. One family’s home collapsed in on itself under the weight of a fallen tree. They’re just standing in front of it, unsure if it’s even safe to go near. The house’s garage next door has been completely crushed, and what looks like the remains of both a lawnmower and someone’s garden are jumbled together and strewn across the front yard.

My Dad slows the car at the corner of our street, and a man cleaning up his front yard smiles and waves. My Dad waves back, but as soon as we drive off, the man’s smile disappears. I can see why.

The left half of the house is crushed, and the right half of the roof is caving in. A section of the wall on the second floor of the house is completely gone - laying in the front yard by the looks of it - and I can see inside someone’s room. The room is decimated, crushed bits of wood lying here and there.

We turn the corner and drive up our street. Finally, my house comes into view. My Dad parks the car and gets out. I’m tempted to close my eyes and run far, far away, but I unclip my seat belt and follow him.

The tree that my Mom managed to tie a rope swing to when I was six has fallen over into the side of our house. The garage roof has caved in, and the roof on the rest of the house is threatening to do the same. The windows are shattered and the house almost looks like it’s leaning to the right.

My home, my life, the place I could always rely on for fifteen years, is destroyed.

Tears prick the corner of my eyes. I blink a million times but they refuse to go away. My Mom turns toward me and Mya and smiles “Not too bad I suppose,” she says. “We can probably go inside and get some of our things out.”

I want to tell her she doesn’t have to put on a fake face for me. That I know it’s bad. But I guess she’s saying it more for Mya than me. I look over at Mya, and sure enough, her face shines with tears. I decide to help Mom out.

I paste on a grin and take her hand. “Want to go look for Tom?”

Tom, Mya’s stuffed cat, was accidentally left behind when we evacuated. She hadn’t realized she’d left him behind until it was too late to go back. She’d cried about it for four nights in a row before we got her to stop.

Mya smiles weakly and nods. Together, we walk towards the house. Inside, everything is upended. The living room couch is in the kitchen for some unknown reason. There’s broken wood everywhere. The walls are beginning to crumble just enough that you can see the insulation inside of them. The carpet in the living room squelches when I step on it. The cabinet doors in the kitchen are just barely attached to the cabinet.

Mya and I head towards the stairs. Supposedly, she left Tom in her room. I don’t have the heart to tell her Tom

was probably obliterated in the hurricane. I make Mya wait at the bottom of the stairs so I can test if they're stable or not. They creak terribly when I step on them, but I don't go crashing to the floor, so I wave Mya to me.

Mya's room is the first door at the top of the hall. Mya rushes ahead of me, flinging open the door to her room and barging in. By the time I reach the doorway she's already set to work, chucking broken toys and waterlogged books out of her way.

"Be careful!" I say. The windows in her room have broken, and bits of glass litter the ground. Mya doesn't seem to mind, she simply steps over the broken glass and continues her search. I shrug and leave the room. I head towards the end of the hall, open the door to my room, and step in.

My room is in bad shape. The window above my desk is shattered and the desk itself has fallen over. The books that usually stayed tucked in the corner of my room are scattered everywhere. One of the walls is cracked down the middle.

My eyes blur, and I stumble over to my bed. I sit and tuck my knees under my chin. I try not to think about what's going to happen, but I can't help wondering.

What are we going to do?

Something catches my attention in my peripheral vision. I reach over and grab it. It's my old baby blanket, worn with age. It's torn down the middle, held together by a few threads. I've had this blanket for years. I used to refuse to sleep unless I had it with me.

I don't know why, but after everything, this is what makes me cry. Tears pool in the corners of my eyes, and I clutch the stupid baby blanket to my chest and sob.

I look up around the room. At the broken windows and the cracked walls. I think of the shattered windows, the nerve-wracking lean of my house, and the tree threatening to break through the side of the house. I can't help but think of all the towns, why mine? Why couldn't I have lived in a town that the storm passed over? Or the lucky one whose house was somehow missed?

I take the two halves of the baby blanket and desperately try to fit them together. To fix something, when everything else is so messed up. If I hold it just so, it almost looks like it was never torn at all.

But even if I had a needle and thread, it wouldn't look the same. It wouldn't be the baby blanket I couldn't sleep without for six years.

"Lydia! Where are you?"

I jump, but it's just my mom yelling from downstairs.

"Upstairs!" I yell back.

"I don't want you up there. I'm not sure how safe it is." She calls.

"Okay." I wipe my face and shove the blanket into my pocket. I stand, and hurry out. I take the stairs two at a time, almost sprinting.

Like I'll be able to outrun the fact that my house is falling apart.

My parents are standing on the porch, whispering quietly, when I get downstairs. Mya is sitting on the steps next to them, clutching something in her hands. When I get close enough, I'm able to see that it's Tom. He's a little worse for wear, a few tears here and there, but mostly intact. I sit down next to her. Mya holds up Tom, maneuvering his limbs to make him look like he's waving.

She talks in a baby voice, saying "Hi, Lydia! I missed you!"

I look down at my lap, my smile faltering slightly. Mya leans against me, resting her head on my shoulder. I look over at her. Even though she's playing with Tom, seemingly joyous, her eyes are red from crying.

I look up at the rest of my neighborhood. I see the different homes in various states of destruction and the families just standing there, staring at them. Everyone here has had something destroyed in the hurricane. They've all lost things that were important to them.

I look at the different friends and families standing together. Finding comfort in each other even when the hurricane has destroyed part or all of their homes. I think of the baby blanket ripped down the middle. This whole time I've been so upset about what I've lost, about what the storm ruined, that I've forgotten about the things I still have.

I thought when I evacuated with my family, I couldn't possibly fit my whole life into two suitcases. I'd had to bring the "essentials" with me when really the essentials were what I thought I was leaving behind. But I'd had the essentials with me all along.

I just needed my family. That was all.

Life is screwed up, but I have all I need. I lived in this house for fifteen years, but my mom, dad, and Mya are what made it home. Maybe it really doesn't feel like it right now, but I'm incredibly lucky.

I wrap my arm around Mya. "I love you," I say.

"Love you, too."

Lucille Elliott

Age: 16, Grade: 11

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

Educator: Patty Smith

Category: Short Story

Virginia to Oklahoma

On a map, Oklahoma didn't seem so far away. We were learning about the fifty states in class, and I committed the space between Oklahoma and Virginia to memory. Just four states west: Virginia, Tennessee, Arkansas, Oklahoma.

I often imagined my mom's life out there. Sitting at my desk, scuffing my Mary-Janes against the linoleum, I wondered what she was doing at that exact moment. I'd just figured out time zones and the one-hour difference between us. As my first class started, I'd think about her just waking up; as I went to sleep, I wondered if she was sitting on the couch with her boyfriend, laughing at a silly movie.

I was in the fifth grade, just about to move up to middle school. Fifth grade graduation's approach was rapid. I didn't like that thought. My mom had just moved to Oklahoma a few months ago and showed no sign of returning for the ceremony. It was so close that we'd already done rehearsals and everything: in white dresses and shirts, we practiced the slow walk down the aisle between rows of metal chairs. It would be the nicest, prettiest thing to ever happen at my rat-infested school. I was going to be congratulated in front of everyone for my perfect test scores and honor roll, and I didn't even care that it would be in the school gymnasium.

And Mom wouldn't be there. In Oklahoma, she prepared for the arrival of her second child. She was so excited to have a son. I liked the idea of a brother, but my daydreams always included him living with me.

A few weeks before graduation, Dad sent her pictures of my pretty white dress. It was long and flowy, with puffy sleeves and a skirt that swished around my ankles. Mom wrote back, *pretty princess! wish i could be there xoxo*. She and her boyfriend sent a Walgreens card with ten dollars in it. Mom wrote they would be there for my birthday in a couple months, but the word "promise" appeared nowhere in her neat handwriting.

My grandma didn't like my mom.

Grandma's face closed down whenever I brought Mom up. A shadow would pass over her and she would change the subject.

When Grandma cooked, I would sit at her kitchen table, coloring my drawings of princesses and fairies, and something would make me say, "I miss Mommy."

She would stop and stare down at the bubbling pan with pursed lips, as though the grease personally offended her. Then, carefully even: "Why don't you help me make dinner?"

At least it was better than when I was little. Before, when Mom still lived in Virginia, and I saw her more often, Grandma was pure vitriol. I would mention Mom, and Grandma's nose would scrunch, her words would become acidic. *Your mother doesn't know what she's doing, she'd spit, she's off with a new boyfriend, in a new apartment, that evil woman—*

And then my dad would shout, *It's not your place to tell her those things, let her decide for herself how she thinks of her mom*, and my grandma would shout back, *She needs to know what her mother is up to* and Grandpa and I would watch Tinkerbell and try not to listen.

I never thought it was out of the ordinary, my mom not being around.

Where I grew up, lots of kids only had one parent. I knew a girl with a dad in jail, a boy whose mom was shot, another who lived with his grandparents for a reason I never learned. I lived in a school district of latchkey kids and abandonment issues. Every afternoon, the streets were full of kids who knew too early how to mold their sentences in a way that made it sound as though they had two parents at home.

Sure, there was a dull ache. I missed her, even when she just lived across the city. No matter where she was, the threads that connected us always tugged at my heart. But they were frayed and weak, and if they tugged back at her I wouldn't know it. I was happy with just my dad, or at least I told myself that. I ignored my friends who spoke happily of mother-daughter days. I ignored the ash taste every Walgreens card left in my mouth.

The night before my fifth-grade graduation, Dad handed me his phone and told me to FaceTime my mom. I took it back to my room and waited for her to pick up.

Her face came up on the screen bright and happy, red on her freckled cheeks and a smile tugging at her lips. "Hey, lovebug," she said, "What are you up to?"

I rested my head between my knees, holding the phone out in front of me. "My graduation is tomorrow," I said softly. I didn't mean to, but I accidentally gave it an accusatory tone. The *so why aren't you in town?* hung in the air.

Her face shifted, her smile twisting into something sadder. Somewhere I couldn't see, a man called her name. She turned away from the camera to shout back, "Just a minute, babe!"

She turned back, and her smile had become fake again, like it'd been plastered on her face. "I wish I could be there."

I think she was telling the truth. I know she *wanted, wished, cared, was sorry*; I also know she wasn't there.

"Okay," I mumbled back. I flicked my eyes up to the screen and then looked back down once I caught sight of that smile that didn't reach her eyes. "Will you come to Virginia for my birthday?" I turned eleven in two months.

I didn't need to look to see her face — I heard the sudden intake of breath; the *oh, God, not again* was practically tangible.

"I don't think so," she said softly, "Not with — I mean, there's the baby, and, you know, *he*—" she jerked her head in the direction of her boyfriend's voice, which could faintly be heard shouting about football even though I was pretty sure football was over for the year. "—just got a new job and all..."

"Right." I didn't say anything more. I could say, Maybe Thanksgiving, but I knew what the answer would be. She didn't bring it up either. The thread frayed a little bit more.

That night, I lay in bed thinking. I couldn't sleep — my mind was caught on my mother, on the brother I'd soon have, on Oklahoma. She had other things going on, she couldn't split her time between two states. But if I was in Oklahoma, too, wouldn't that make everything easier?

Like a revelation, the United States map flooded my vision. I counted the states again. Virginia, Tennessee, Arkansas, Oklahoma.

Only four.

Before the graduation ceremony began, my classmates and I all floated around the room we'd known for the last few years. With all of us dressed in white, our hair curled, wearing our shiniest shoes, we looked like a gaggle of tiny ghosts. My classmates were practically buzzing with excitement — most of us weren't used to wearing such nice clothes, and we'd all gotten brand new dresses and shirts and slacks.

While other kids crowded around a table of snacks, giggling about middle school, I sat at my desk for the last time. I eyed the backpacks strewn about the room; most were empty, brought just for the sake of hairbrushes or to pick up stray belongings left in the classroom. Mine was full.

Chaos erupted the moment the teacher pulled out a box of cupcakes — this was my chance. I took a deep breath, one, two, stood, slung my backpack over my shoulder, and walked to the door. Head up, act natural, even when I thought I heard the teacher say my name. The door was ajar; I pushed it open with my foot and slipped out into the hall as soon as it was wide enough. Step one complete.

Scuffed linoleum flooring and barren walls stretched on in either direction. There wasn't a soul in sight. Twisting my backpack straps with my hands, I stood there for a second before marching towards the large door at the end of the hall. I repeated my earlier mantra to myself: Act natural. Nothing to see here. Somewhere behind me, a door creaked open, and I fought the urge to look back.

And... I stepped out into the soccer field. That easy. They didn't even lock the door?

I squinted against the hot sun. The parking lot was on the other side of the school, so I was out of sight of any arriving parents. I took a moment to stop and think about what I had just done. Skipped school. If I got caught...

But I wouldn't get caught. By the time anyone thought to look for me, I would be halfway to Oklahoma.

I began my trek through the wet grass. My ankles twisted in my brand-new wedged boots and the pretty white dress grew uncomfortable with sweat, but I had to hurry before anyone noticed my absence. The nearest bus stop was a half-mile away.

My great adventure was not going as planned.

For starters, it began to rain halfway through my walk. Then, when I finally made it to the graffiti-covered bus stop shelter, I realized something: I didn't know what time the bus was supposed to get there. Or where the buses went. I didn't know the bus route at all.

As I sat on the bench, swinging my feet, a lump rose in my throat. I wasn't sure how long I'd have to wait for the bus... But I'd packed some snacks, and a change of shoes, so I was okay, right? To distract myself, I pulled off my boots and replaced them with sneakers. Once the bus got there, I figured I could just ask the driver how I could get to Oklahoma. Surely he could just drop me at the airport.

A few more minutes passed. I dug a well-worn copy of *The Lightning Thief* out of my bag, clutched it to my chest for a minute, then turned it to the first page I'd memorized long ago. *'Look, I didn't want to be a half-blood...'* But my eyes unfocused and blurred over the words in front of me. Still I persevered, blinking past the fog with thoughts of how excited Mom would be when I got there! I let myself sink into the familiar chapters of my book and got through quite a few before I thought to look up.

There still wasn't a bus.

My foot beat a staccato rhythm against the cracked concrete. This was taking a lot longer than I thought it would. Holding my book to my chest, I stood up and started to pace. Could I get a taxi? I didn't really know how taxis worked — in the movies, you could just wave one down, but that wasn't how it worked in Norfolk. Didn't you have to call someone? So I'd have to borrow a phone, then, but wouldn't people be suspicious if I asked for their

phone?

I struggled to keep my breathing even, so I started timing my breaths with my steps. I must have circled that bus stop thirty-something times before someone shouted my name.

I froze. I recognized the car that had just parked in front of me — and I definitely recognized the driver. My dad scrambled out and rushed toward me, the relief on his face clear. My heart dropped.

He crouched and grabbed my biceps, searching my face. “Kid, what the hell are you doing here?” His cheeks and nose and eyes were all red.

It startled me, seeing the remnants of tears; I’d never seen my dad cry.

And with that realization, the stupidity of my plan crashed down on me. I felt much smaller than I had when I stepped out of the school. I shrugged, looking down at my feet. “I dunno.”

My dad shook his head. “You don’t know? You’ve been missing an hour and a half! Everyone and their mother is looking for you — what are you doing?”

I avoided his eyes, searching over his shoulder for an answer. But the tri-cycle in the lawn across the street held no answers, no way to explain except: “I wanted to go and see Mom.”

“Would it hurt to just visit *once*?”

My house was small and the walls were thin. Dad’s tense phone call was clear even where I sat curled in the corner of my bedroom, still in my graduation dress.

“I know about the baby, but—!”

I tugged slightly at the hem of the dress. Before, I’d thought it was the prettiest thing in the world. Now I wanted to burn it.

“You know I can’t let her visit when you have that *man* in the house.”

A Walgreens card lay discarded on the floor next to me. I opened it up and ran my fingers over the neat cursive handwriting.

“You never should have even gone to Oklahoma. Worst decision you ever made, and let me tell you, you’ve made some bad ones — don’t you hang up on me, she’s your daughter too!”

Dad didn’t say anything after that, but his words echoed in my mind.

She’s your daughter too.

So why didn’t it feel like I was?

I didn’t think moms were supposed to feel like this: measuring with a ruler the distance on a map between Virginia and Oklahoma and converting it to miles, tracing the road map in bed, thinking about what you would say when you saw her again. If you saw her again.

Four states were bigger than I thought. Almost 2,000 miles — or at least that’s what Dad said. I wasn’t getting myself to Oklahoma, and Mom wasn’t coming to Virginia. The thread could tug all it wanted, but Mom wasn’t going to follow it anytime soon.

Aidan Gibson

Age: 18, Grade: 12

School Name: Douglas Freeman High School, Richmond, VA

Educator: Jess Pruett

Category: Personal Essay & Memoir

Unhinged

Unhinged

It's three months into virtual learning when the first hinge snaps. As I sit at my desk, listening to my chemistry lecture, I feel the collapse begin. My keyboard tray is giving way under the wear and tear of overuse. A once-in-a-hundred-years pandemic has asked a lot of my desk: to connect me to school and to friends, to endure the constant knocking of my knees, and to serve as an elbow rest during seven hours of virtual classes each day. But it is starting to crack. Only two hinges left.

During calculus class, I tinker with the busted hinge. My calculus teacher has always had a talent for connecting the thread of math to the quilt of the real world. We learn to use Newton's Law of Cooling to calculate how long scalding hot soup needs to cool before it can be stored in the fridge. And now, even learning through a screen, I am reminded of the magic of math. It always works. It never cracks. There's always a solution to the problem.

Piles of paper routinely litter the floor of my room, now serving as bedroom, office, and virtual headquarters. Studying there among the stacks, I come upon tiny screws and nails, fallen from the desk. It is sending me a very unsubtle message. Things fall apart, as the poet says. The center cannot hold.

I wonder if one day I will awake to find a pile of splinters where the desk now stands, but I think it best not to dwell on it.

During the home stretch, just a few weeks before summer break, the second hinge gives way. The stress is apparently becoming unbearable. It happens as I sit at my desk being transported to other realms. I am Qorzai the Unknown, a powerful necromancer serving a ruthless mercenary company. Dungeons & Dragons online with friends has been my escape, my reprieve from the Covid crisis. Every new D&D character serves as an opportunity to tell a new tale. It gives me joy to write my characters' backstories and flesh them out in creative ways. I draw on the rhetorical pieces our English class reads. Like Shakespeare's Mark Anthony, my charismatic nobleman beseeches the commoners of his town to "lend me your ears." My stories keep me moving forward as the world stands painfully still. But the snap of the hinge snaps me back to reality. Friends, Romans, countrymen, lend me a screwdriver.

Final exams arrive. Only one hinge left, holding on bravely in spite of its fallen brethren. As I flip through my history notes, getting ready for the AP exam, I am unsurprised to find a nail appropriately lodged in our unit on Reconstruction.

The school year ends. I have time to attend to the things that kept me together. I replace hinges and tighten screws. My thoughts turn to the support that had kept me from snapping. It was not just the calming certitude of math and the escapist fantasy of D&D. It was the love of my parents and sister, the fierce loyalty of my friends, the unwavering persistence of my teachers. And the spirit inside of all of us that finds a way to hold it together when the pieces threaten to come apart.

Ananya Gomatam

Age: 16, Grade: 11

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

Educator: Ed Coleman

Category: Poetry

numbers; flat iron; worthless.

numbers

One, two, ten, fifty
strands of hair in her brush.
Three, four, fifteen, forty-five
bundles of hair on the floor.
140, 135, 132
nothing was ever low enough
Eighteen, nineteen, twenty
only 3 more reps to go
seven six zero
calories consumed in one day
Beep, beep, beep
her hair piled on the ground like leaves off a branch in autumn
Swaying this way and that, a gentle hand dropped her to the floor
Stay with me sweet girl

flat iron

the sun has yet to awake
but
the seemingly solemn house
bustles awake in a single room
her room

she starts each morning pulling the mask off her eyes
runs fine bristles across her teeth
pulls a knot through the tangled mess atop her head
counts the seconds til each beep

she steps into a cascade of water
delicately, slowly
all too careful

wrapped in towel,
she sits and spreads creams on her face
up and over, to the side and out

she opens a drawer and pulls out a machine
of two straight slabs and heat,
to stretch and pull
natural to subdued

if hair is a reflection of self, she is nowhere to be found
she is hidden beneath layers

of both self protection and self imposed harm

worthless.

She slathers her hair with oil,
Efforts to make it grow thick
Thick and voluptuous and beautiful
(it thins instead, delicate and fine like the wings of a butterfly)

"Dont brush your hair it makes it frizzy
Dont brush your hair, it damages,"
Repeats through her head
You want definition; you want spirals and ringlets
(her hair frizzes and poofs each chance it gets, an untamable tumbleweed)

Her body it thickens
Widens at the waist, hips, face
Thunder thighs, they're called

There was one time.
For a while in the 7th grade,
She was skinny
She was slim and pretty all at fourteen.
at fifteen the only thing that changed, no matter how many tears
no matter how much sweat and pain,
was the scale going up.
The scale only went up
Up up upupupupupup

When she goes out she knows
She knows she is being judged
She knows that cruel kohl lined eyes will track her
and then at her sister
And then back at her, wondering why she was so
Fat.

She feels trapped
Trapped in a box, a jail cell;
A bystander as her body is puppeteered by an invisible force
Unblinkingly forced through the motions day by day
Until one day everything just
Stops.

i'm worthless.

Aiden Jun

Age: 16, Grade: 11

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

Educator: Mia Tambellini

Category: Poetry

Merry Go Round

i was shiny and new the summer of '84
bright yellow body with a red saddle
mary,
a little girl with a big smile
hopped on and the smooth ride began

you experienced my constant reality
that you had bought with just a dime
we went round and round and
when it came to an end,
you tugged your dad's arm to ride again

you came back every summer since then
grew little by little
but then you chose the other rides instead
the ferris wheel
drop tower
pendulum

while you were gone,
i took others on the ride
the same old ride

my gold mane turned to rust
my saddle is red no more
when the ride ends,
i come to a screeching halt

i am trapped in the endless cycle
a slave to the children's song that all of us have memorized
just when I think it's over
the lever is pushed again
and we hear the despairing melody once more

i thought you would no longer come
but I was wrong
you stopped by with your little boy
with your big smile

but too much time has passed
the ride closed
in the summer of '03

Hollie Kim

Age: 13, Grade: 7

School Name: L Douglas Wilder Middle School, Richmond, VA

Educator: KERI WORMALD

Category: Poetry

red rover

red rover, red rover
send beating-ups right over

slam it into my face
like i am slammed into walls
give me my space
and you won't see me at all

red rover, red rover
send rumors right over

ugly words
are a witch's way
but they can't be erred
or washed away

red rover, red rover
send secrets right over

storybooks
i locked away in droves
they take unasked-for looks
into my secret cove

red rover, red rover
send rumors right over

the friends i miss
throw me dirty looks
am i just a fish
in a sea of hooks

red rover, red rover
you've already sent me over.

Anna Moseley

Age: 16, Grade: 11

School Name: Mills Godwin High School, Richmond, VA

Educator: Lynn Farley

Category: Poetry

Oops, I Got Distracted

I see through a tunnel.

Sometimes it's too narrow,
An intense and singular focus.
Most times it's too wide,
And full of hocus-pocus.

I think through a tunnel.

If it breaks a little bit,
It all comes crashing down.
It could take hours to repair,
Only to spin around.

Maybe it will widen out,
Or spiral into space.
Maybe it will narrow down,
But in a different place.

I work through a tunnel.

It makes me repeat things,
Since I can't see what I've said.
It keeps me wide awake
When I lay down in my bed.

It makes me so disjointed,
A halfway-scrambled mess.
It makes me so creative,
A dreamer, I must confess.

It sends things rolling through my brain
At twelve o'clock at night.
They capture me and don't let go
And say I have to write.

Where does it go
And what's at the end?
Is there a light
And does it extend?

What am I doing
And where am I going?

Who am I seeing
And who am I showing?

How do I organize
My thoughts in one place
When they're a million and one
And they all interlace?

Can I connect these
Ideas and these stanzas
In a written artwork
With the page as my canvas?

These ideas are as disparate
As my focus is fractured.
Can I make them a story
That keeps one enraptured?

Sometimes my standards
Are so very high:
A bit cliché, but
They could touch the sky.

Other times my standards
Are so very low:
"Get it done well enough
And then you can go."

What is this poem,
This writing even becoming?
I started with a plan
But now my thoughts are all humming.

Swirling in my brain
Like a river that's flowing,
Are ideas that are constantly
Coming and going.

This is getting so long
I don't know where to go,
But I can't let it end
While inspirations still flow.

My brain is running
At a mile a minute
And I can't do a thing
While the sky is the limit.

If I wish upon a star,
How much power does it have?
Would it just be in my head,
Or could it split the Earth in half?

I keep writing mostly
'Cause I need a distraction
From all of my thoughts
About all that might happen.

Too much of this free time
Is my anxiety's grand prix.
To a torrent of worries,
It's the three times cursed key.

I don't want this to end,
Because when it does,
It'll reset my most nervous
Thoughts all abuzz.

I've rhymed now so many
Of the words that I know,
But these ideas have consumed me
And they're not letting go.

Rhythms are taking over
Every thought in my mind,
But there is no escaping:
With my thoughts they're entwined.

I've already said this,
But when will it end?
These thoughts just keep coming,
Rolling 'round the bend.

I'm thinking in rhythms,
In patterns of four,
But will I be stuck
Like this evermore?

I'm rhyming the things
That I think and I say,
And writing these lines
As I go through my day.

My words come in patterns,
As though someone is hexing
My thoughts to form rhythms
And it's getting quite vexing.

At nearly four whole pages,
This just keeps going on.
How long can I keep
This writing going strong?

A need for conclusion
That I'd hoped to avoid,
Says I must say "Goodbye,"
And "I hope you enjoyed."

But how do I end
This long thought train of mine?
Maybe by saying I won't wait
For the stars to align,

Or by informing you, the reader,

That this was, at first, not meant to rhyme.

Pooja Muthuraj

Age: 17, Grade: 12

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

Educator: Peter Cashwell

Category: Personal Essay & Memoir

Note on 11/15/2020

Today my father cried for the first time since his mother died. That means a lot. We all cried. A lot.

Crying because in their eyes, I had already died. My ship had capsized, I was drowning. Or at least, it was only a matter of time.

And I guess it was. Only a matter of time. Before the water got to my head, and I lost control of it. I knew time flew, but I didn't realize it was such a ferocious swimmer, too.

I remember believing I could breathe underwater, back when I was younger. I loved the feeling of diving under, the water ripping coolly across my back. The power.

I felt it coursing through my bones, merging the blood in my crannies with the veins of the earth. I became a part of it. I lost myself in it.

Now water is my biggest fear. The most unexplored, unexplained fraction of infinity. I have learned to fear its terrible strength. Losing myself to it. How a single wave is all it takes to knock you off your feet, off your pedestal, off the surface of what you thought was the whole wonderful, wounded world.

My biggest nightmare growing up was drowning. I would dream of it every night for years, until my bed sheets turned to coral reefs, my mattress to a manta ray, my reading lamp an anglerfish with an amputated fin.

I'm still scared to breathe in my sleep. Lest I inhale it and let it fill me completely, down to the pitch-black pit of my stomach—until I grow so heavy that I sink.

I need to be light, or I will sink. I need to float. My body is my flotation device. I am hollow. Air. Full of it. Hot air that has chilled and shrunk its container to fit it.

I understand you, anorexia. I do. You're not trying to kill me, you're trying to save me, resuscitate me, keep me afloat. I appreciate that. And look, I've withered into a mermaid just to show it. My legs've wrinkled into a tail, my skin cells shriveled into scales. I imagine you are proud of my new fragile hairless headless form.

I still can't breathe underwater. But I can't breathe above it anymore, either. I understand that, but it's hard to convince my lungs to stop trying to be gills. I've spent so long trying to make myself float. To keep myself from sinking, to become my own buoy.

But only dead bodies float. The only bodies that float are dead. Any body with a scrap of life left in it will either sink or swim, and my father's tears tell me this as they roll down his scraggly cheeks, that dying is not a good way to save oneself from drowning.

I want to cup them in my fingertips and say, "don't cry. you're beautiful, you are. i love you."

I wrote this to tell you your tears are beautiful, dad. And also that I love you.

Not because this is a suicide note, but because I really do.

I love you.

Carter Nieman

Age: 15, Grade: 10

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

Educator: Patty Smith

Category: Flash Fiction

dreams of truth

Dreams of Truth

"You have to at least try confirmation. Father Brown is a very good priest, and he'll answer all your questions."
". . ."

I can't say the words *'I don't believe in your God, or any, for that matter.'* I'm still stuck. I have tried dropping hints, asking mom the question *"Is there really a God up there?"* I thought she would've figured it out. But my mom, who can pick up so easily on when I'm lying about having done my homework, or about brushing my teeth last night, can not spot this lie.

"When do you want to go to confirmation? There's slots open for next month, and the month after that. I can't wait to start going back to church together as a family. It's been too long."

It's been about 4 years since my family has made an effort to go to church together. I've enjoyed the peace and quiet these 4 years have offered.

I was an atheist, even when going to church. Even when young, I reckoned myself agnostic. In 4th grade, during a conversation between children about religion, when everyone else would conform and agree to whomever spouted their opinion the fastest; even back then I had considered my views different from my parents.

"I'm agnostic", I had said, lifting my face up ever so slightly. That I had reached a concrete opinion filled me with a sense of superiority.

"What's that?" Someone had asked.

"It's where you don't believe or not believe in God" I had explained.

But those words had stayed hidden away from the person who should've heard them most.

My mother was a religious person; even when our family had shied away from church for 4 years, she would meditate and pray every day. It made me scared, whenever I passed by or interrupted. Not because I thought that my mother would be mad, but because she would ask me to join her.

I have sometimes wondered if I am the problem. I cannot say that my mother is being unkind; only stubborn.

Whenever she asks me to join her, she doesn't do so out of a hatred for me, but out of an attempt to share something that brings her peace.

She'll always be in the dark until I tell her. If I want these talks about religion to stop, I have to make them stop.

But I'm just not able to.

"Two months away sounds good."

Laila Patel

Age: 13, Grade: 8

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

Educator: Julie Elmore

Category: Short Story

The Crimson Lehenga

There are days that occur every so often when the sky is an alluring blue and the air is as fresh as the mangoes that grow outside our home. These days are heaven. It was one of these days on which my thirteenth birthday took place, and I woke up knowing today would be a perfect day.

I am thirteen years old today, April 14, 1944. Nani, my grandmother, always tells me I am special, for April is the beginning of the summer season. She says maybe I will begin something extraordinary, too. I say that many people are born in April, and that does not make me special. On this particular morning, instead of laying drowsily in my bed, I rush down the hall and into the kitchen.

“*Namaste*, Nani!”

She looks up and smiles, her wrinkles hiding the ghost of the young, happy girl she used to be in the pictures that Nana, my grandfather, used to show me before he passed. Nani is my favorite person in the whole world. Nana and Nani had an arranged marriage, but loved each other immediately and throughout their lives. I hope I will find someone special one day too, who makes me as happy as Nani used to be.

“*Namaste*, Vinod. Come, eat you breakfast.” Nani is taking me to Bombay today, as she has always promised she would do on my thirteenth birthday. The rest of my family is already seated, and all wish me a happy birthday. My little sister, Rita, sits on a pile of pillows, eating her barfi. I wonder why she gets dessert for breakfast.

“Happy birthday, Didi! I am the ruler of pillow mountain!” She climbs the table, stands on the edge, and dives into the cushions below.

“Calm down, *beta*,” my mother scolds her. My parents both wish me a happy birthday. My father sits at the head of the table, with my other sister, Veena, in his lap. My mother and Nani run a barfi stand at the marketplace, and father repairs clocks. I feel a soft tap on my shoulder, and turn around, to see my brother, Sunil, standing on his tiptoes to reach my shoulder. He reaches into his pocket and takes out a grey rock, smooth and shiny, engraved with my name in hindi, ■■■■■■

“Happy birthday, Didi,” he says. I thank him, and he nods. He glances over at father and stands up straighter, trying to mimic his straight back and tall stature. I smile, for I know he wishes to please him. After breakfast I clean the kitchen with Nani and walk out of the door, barefoot.

I stroll up the street and fetch the newspaper and groceries from the market. Many people wish me a happy birthday. The woman who sells naan, curry, and fruit at the market lets me carry the groceries home myself, instead of telling me to wait for an adult like she used to. I feel like a true adult today. I walk home with my head held high and make my way to the doorstep. There sits Rita, bouncing up and down.

“What’s the passcode?” she asks.

“Rita, I don't have time for this. I have very important things to do today,” I say in my best adult voice. She frowns.

“Well, you can’t do your very important things until you get the password right.” These groceries are heavy, and I’m too old to play this, but I don't tell her that. Instead, I say,

“Ok, how about... open sesame!” She crosses her arms.

“No? How about abracadabra!” She shakes her head. This is such a waste of time.

“Um, how about... please?” She giggles.

“Good job, Didi!” She hops down from the steps and runs down the road to go play with her friends in the street.

I drop the groceries in the kitchen and walk to my room that I share with my siblings. I pull out my only dress, the one I always wear to the temple, and drape the matching dupatta shawl over my shoulder. I have grown a lot in the

past year, already reaching five feet, so the dress has gotten a bit tight, but I don't ask for a new one because I know money is earned, not given. I quickly look around to make sure I am alone, and do a little twirl. Nani walks in and smiles.

"I had something else in mind for you today, Vinod," she says.

Nani takes my hand and leads me to her room. I love everything about Nani. The way she smells, the way she talks, and the way she brightens my day no matter what. Her room is very simple with a bed and a dresser. I expect her to lead me to the dresser, but instead she sits on the concrete floor and pulls out a small chest from under the bed. Silently, she opens it. Inside, there are two small statues, one of Lord Ganesh and the other of Lord Krishna. There is a box of beautiful bangles, the color of the desert. Lastly, she pulls out a beautiful lehenga dress of crimson red embellished with gold beads.

"I wore this on a very special day of my life, and I want you to have it," she says. I gasp, for I have never owned anything this beautiful. I thank her and run to my room to change. The lehenga fits like a glove and I drape the matching dupatta shawl over my head and around my shoulders. I step towards the mirror and gasp. I have never worn or owned anything as beautiful as this. I feel a rush of emotions as I realize how special this dress is to Nani. I move delicately through the house, careful not to so much as brush the skirt against the walls.

An hour later, Nani and I are climbing aboard the rickshaw cart that will take us to Bombay. During the ride, I can see her shining with excitement and take her hand. We climb off and the driver says,

"Welcome to Bombay, enjoy your day." A few of us dismount and everyone leaves for their destination, except Nani and I. She looks around with happy tears in her eyes.

"I have not been here since I came with your Nana so many years ago." I see the years reflected in her eyes and smile. She wipes her eyes.

"Let us get on with your birthday, *beta*." We walk down to the harbor and look out at the horizon- or where the horizon should be. Instead, there is a large cargo ship slowly drifting closer to the docks. I sigh, for I was hoping to see the ocean, not another British ship. Nani looks disappointed as well, but says,

"Come, Vinod, you have not had a bite to eat yet. Perhaps the ship will move soon." This is what saved my life. We climbed the hill back to the rickshaw cart after a delicious, slightly undercooked meal of rice and daal. Suddenly we hear screams behind us and the smell of smoke tickles our throats. I whip my head around and see the cargo ship, still in the middle of the water, but on fire. Everyone is screaming and panicking, and I can see many people diving off of the boat in an attempt to abandon it. The fire has spread to almost the entire boat, and this is the moment where my head clears and I know what I have to do. I grab Nani by the arm and shout,

"We have to get as far away from here as possible." I see the fear in her eyes as she shakily nods and we run up the hill and down the other side. We rush through the streets and are caught up with other people, all attempting to flee. It is then when the world seems to end. There is a deafening explosion from behind us and suddenly the earth trembles. Nani falls to the ground as the buildings collapse around us. I grab her arm and pull her up, desperately trying to help her. Nani's breathing becomes ragged. The shop behind us begins to collapse, crushing a small group of children attempting to take cover. I hear them scream for help and I desperately run to them, hoping to pull them out before the roof caves, when suddenly it's too late. A broken metal rod scrapes my arm, cutting a deep gash. I cry out in pain. Everywhere there are people laying in the streets, dead or wounded. I feel Nani's hand on my wrist, pulling me away from the demolished buildings. We run through the chaos, through the screams of a mother searching for the children she won't find alive, through the destruction and the fear. Blood trickles down my arm and the smoke stings my eyes. A group of men run through the rubble, saving those they can. Many people around us scream to get their attention, hoping to be saved, but there are too many of us and not enough of them. One man grabs Nani and I roughly and we run to the safer part of the block. He drops us to the ground without a word and sprints back into the dust. After checking on Nani, I look down at myself. I gasp in horror as tears blur my vision. Nani's beautiful lehenga is torn, shredded, and covered in blood and dust.

The next few days are a blur. I cough up dust for three days on end. My arm has begun to heal and I wear a large bandage, wrapped from my forearm to my wrist. My vision gets better, but my eyes are still hazy from the dust. Nani and my mother have closed the barfi shop and the streets are empty. My father no longer goes to work. When we initially returned, no one had gotten the news of the explosion. The word quickly spread throughout our village and suddenly everything changed. Children no longer wander the streets, women no longer gossip at the fruit stall, and it is no longer safe to be out past dark. Father is silent and mother talks more than ever to make up for his deafening silence. Nani, thankfully with no detriments to her health, cooks us meals and tries her best to stay positive. Rita asks question upon question, while Veena recoils at any mention of the explosion. Sunil is still in shock, from the moment he saw us arriving home, covered in ashes, blood, and dust.

Three days after the explosion, I lay awake in bed and hear mother and father whisper-arguing.

"We cannot possibly leave! Think of the children! Where would we go?" Mother is angry, for her voice gets softer and softer when she is.

"Karatilal, soon there will be nothing left here, and we will run out of money and starve. Mother cannot and will not live like this, and we cannot raise our children here."

Mother sighs.

"You are right in that way, but we have no place to go, and no way to get there! And what about your sister? We cannot leave them!"

"We won't leave them. They will travel with us to America." There is a pause.

All I hear next is mother agreeing, saying,

"You are right, this is best. We must inform the family in the morning." I gasp, for I cannot imagine leaving our home. I silently creep back to bed. I lay down and attempt to close my eyes, but I hear a quiet whisper.

"Didi, are we really going to leave?" Veena sits on the edge of my bed. I sigh.

"I'm not sure," I say.

"But if we do, where will we go? Where will we live? How will we get there?" So many questions I wish I could answer.

The next morning when I enter the kitchen, I am surprised to see my entire family already gathered at the table.

"What's going on?" asks Rita. Father replies,

"We have decided to leave our home. There is nothing left for us here and I cannot raise my children in a place where their safety is a concern. Vinod and my mother were put in a life threatening situation just days ago and are still recovering. Our home is no longer safe, and we cannot guarantee this will not happen again. We-" Rita interrupts father, crying,

"What?! I don't want to leave!" She begins to cry and runs to mother.

"Hush now, Rita. Let your father finish." Father clears his throat and says,

"Vinod, take your siblings. Each of you must take your two most treasured items, three pairs of clothes, and one pair of shoes. We will leave tomorrow at dawn." I send them off to pack but stay in the hallway, listening. Father then turns and addresses Masi and Masa.

"Janni, Shivay, the decision is yours." They look at each other, and at that moment reality hits. If they choose to stay, I will never see them again. Masi says,

"We will come with you. We cannot fathom leaving our family." Father claps his hands and says,

"Alright, it is settled. Pack your valuables and necessities and tomorrow we will travel back to Bombay and part from the docks. Keep this quiet, for if people know we plan to leave, they might try to stop us or follow us."

Suddenly Nani, silent all this time, says,

"If you plan to leave, I will not come with you. I-"

"Mother! How can you say such a thing?" Father interrupts. Nani continues,

"My home is here. I promised your father I would never abandon our home. I cannot break my promise." Father begins to raise his voice.

"Mother, you will wither and starve! You will have no one to take care of you! You must come with us!" Nani solemnly replies,

"I will give you all my blessings and food for the journey." I hear footsteps leaving the kitchen as she walks to her room. The rest of the adults stay, whispering. Masa says,

"She is not going to change her mind. Janni and I will stay with her."

"No! We must convince her to come." My mother, always the wisest, says,

"She feels a deep connection to this house. She will not leave willingly."

Father returns to the kitchen a few minutes later, walking right past the place where I'm hiding in the doorway. He says,

"She has agreed to come, but with much regret. I assume tomorrow she will be very solemn."

"Thank goodness," replies Masi. I hear them all rise and I tiptoe back to my room, where Veena is comforting Rita. I help them pack their bags and send them off to play.

I pack three pairs of clothes and one pair of shoes, pausing only to remember Nani's beautiful lehenga, destroyed in the boat explosion. I promise myself that one day I will save enough money to buy her another dress in our new home, wherever that may be. I tie my bag and remember that I am allowed to pack two valuables. I immediately slip my only pair of earrings into my pocket, given to me by Nana when I was just three years old. I quickly pack the last of my belongings, carefully tucking the photo between my spare clothes. I say my last goodbyes to the house and walk to the kitchen. As I pass the window I see Veena and Rita outside, tossing a ball of leaves back and forth. They stay in the garden, not daring to run to and fro as they used to before the boat explosion in Bombay. I think

back to what my parents said. They are right. We deserve to grow up somewhere where we feel safe enough to venture outside our house.

Adam Rowe

Age: 15, Grade: 10

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

Educator: Gail Giewont

Category: Poetry

And

I.

i've known plenty of highrise buildings, but you have a library on the 66th floor
you know you've reached it when it closes its eyes.
it's a bit too chilly and the books are well-worn with love and time
i've been here before, i've known you before
i'm familiar but unadjusted, and your air-conditioned hum persuades me to stop and read

each book is one of yours, and they are ineloquent.
they are not by you, but for you, and they are paperweights to one another, leaning, leaning,
leaning to heave against your ribs and knock against your heart.
i wish i could write one for you, but i couldn't summarize
your face, your tongue, your mind, and your tinges of pink and purple and peeling wallpaper

you are waterlogged.
you are something stagnant and poignant and pondering and breathing
and when you speak the pages turn and twist and begin to...

please rewrite them
the books, i mean.
see, for you is not *from you*, and from you is from beauty
this library and this skyscraper and all the people down below
unfold from you, to you, through you, because
i made this place for you, for you are from this
but "for you" is not enough, so i will keep writing to you instead-
keep your eyes closed
you've been awake long enough.

II.

i am not welcome in this garden.
i am not welcome next to you.

this garden is bare, and you are a puddle, so deep i cannot see the bottom.
but all the frogs sing to you, all the deer drink from your soul,
and the whippoorwills tell me stories about things you do while i'm gone.
if i touch you i will become murky myself, so i leave you for a day.
tomorrow you are a pool, and children are laughing and playing around you
and i find myself wishing the diving boards allowed me on them
the garden is still growing, and i still am unwelcome
and when the whippoorwills tell me you have a beautiful smile,
i am obligated to believe them.

weeks pass and you're a koi pond, and the water is unbelievably still.
time flickers over my face until the pond has become past tense

you've said nothing in waves and the fish parrot your silence,
swimming from throat to tongue to teeth
"i hold hate in this garden."
i hadn't expected you to speak, not this fast, and the garden stirs to embrace your homecoming
the wind whipped the world and i laid my hand flat against the water.
fish talked through their fins and wished to each other underneath the ground
and you carried them from place to place.
i don't understand where hate lies, whether in be in the pool or the fish or the whippoorwills
and you answered me promptly, but i know it's not from you, but by you
"i hold hate in my heart," the wind said, softly, and the words became lilypads,
and the water stirred.

i don't leave this time, but i sit and watch
watch as the whippoorwills are born from the water
watch as you grow from puddles to pools to ponds to silt between my fingers

you come in with the surf and leave pieces of you on the bank,
and i will watch as you erode the earth
and become the sea

III.

i made the sky a rhyming couplet with legs and lungs and pretty eyes
i made you the goodnight and the good day and the destined

dusk warping around dawn and becoming the same
each pattern they trace becomes constellations between freckles

hands dip into hands dyed golden brown from light
as both honeyed sunset and romantic night are immersion-blended together

i know you two will branch into the universe one day, far away from this place,
but for now, i can watch as the eye of infinity sinks below the horizon line

you grant me this privilege and i will learn from the sky
learn from speech becoming stars and moons becoming their mothers

two skies spread together before breaking along the earth,
and i am left alone with the sun

IV.

i enter the terrarium and finally,
i may sit amongst an infinity
infinite field, infinite sky, infinite everything, and a single weeping tree.
walking up to you, weeping tree, i know that you are finite and beautiful.
i will stretch beneath your limbs and bask in the shadows it creates
you offer me tea- tea- tea- tea, an infinite cup to hold it, the
tea, infinite tea (constantly overflowing) that puddles around our bare roots
and you, the weeping tree, leaves dark and trunk kind, will feed infinitely

if i stopped (even for a moment), i would steep in black honey.
i tap the cup with a spoon i didn't have before.
you don't respond, because the quietude is infinite too
and for a moment i wonder how solemn it must be to dangle above forever, forever
would you *mind* if i stopped here? or have i already overstayed my welcome?
you flit between my fingers like fireflies.
weeping tree, do you cry? can you comprehend infinity
or does even the idea of ceasing make you shrivel up and become dreams?

Adam Rowe

Age: 15, Grade: 10

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

Educator: Gail Giewont

Category: Poetry

The Rot

i am scared to write a portrait of myself
and open a cupboard inside of my stomach.
it feels unnatural to have my own prying fingers next to my intestines
i can feel my whole body breathe.

is this euphoria, or has a deep sickness set into my bones?

my hands reach up next to my heart but
i suck in a quick breath-
it's a papercut from my ribcage.
the cut will surely be infected

i am scarred with hot breath
and that filth has set deep in my rotting bones
i keep going up and it makes me nauseous
i can feel bile on my hands as it raises up my throat
it's time, isn't it?
i'm so excited.

my hands, my hands, my hands
busting out my teeth and prying open my jaws
my bones bow and stretch to make way

tears slip from my eyes and chill my overheating face
and i don't even notice that my hands are beginning to speak

"i will pry your tear ducts open
and sleep behind your eyes
i will die in the vents of your veins
and your body will be my tomb
and i will rot inside of you
and i will never let you go
and you are my god-given right
and you will never be clean
and you will never be clean"

only tasting life on the tips of their fingernails
my hands slip back down my throat, my intestines, my stomach,
fasten the skin around my ripped abdominal cavity,
wipe off the amniotic fluid on my pants,
and hang by my sides
waiting

Lois Sabo

Age: 18, Grade: 12

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

Educator: John Morgan

Category: Humor

Michael Jackson

My real dad is Michael Jackson. I discovered this about a month ago. I was sitting in the backseat of my mom's Toyota minivan listening to Smooth Criminal over the radio and I began to feel this sense of patriarchal warmth surrounding me. Well at least I think that's what I was feeling, it was also really hot that day given the fact that we were in the pits of July so it might have been a genuine heat flash, but I'm like 97 percent sure it was patriarchal warmth. Anyway, when the song ended the radio hosts came back on and started talking about this crazy fan theory that Michael Jackson had a long lost son with this woman he was seeing right before he died. My mom had rolled her eyes and tried to change the station, going on about how they had a theory about everything these days and it was all a load of bs, but I wouldn't let her change it. It was fate. A higher power was trying to reach out right then and lead me to my real father. And of course I had to listen to the signs. It all makes sense thinking back. I always felt a little groove in my body every time Michael came on the radio. And my mom never wanted to listen to his music, claiming that he was a supposed pedophile who gave her the creeps. All along the truth was just that she was trying to hide the built up emotions that she still felt towards her past lover. Of course my mom had wanted to change the channel. She was the one who had the affair with Michael! I vaguely recall her sweating profusely at that moment, and again it was pretty hot but I seriously doubt that's why she was red in the face. So, the truth was out, now it was just time for me to prove it.

I decided to begin researching my theory later that night. I approached my "dad" on the couch. His name is Paul. Paul is an average guy. He would take me to ball games when I was younger. He taught me how to throw a baseball but eventually gave up trying to force me to play sports. Paul was a big sports guy. Definitely no father of mine. I hated sports. Music had to be my new thing. Anyway, that night I asked Paul if he had been at the hospital when I was born. He answered quickly (too quickly if you ask me) that he had.

"Why would you even ask that? Why wouldn't I have been? You're my son," he said.

Yeah, okay Paul. We'll see about that.

I then questioned my mom about it asking her where she and Paul had met and where they had conceived me. I'm kidding, I did not ask that last part. That's disgusting. She is my mother. But she did say that she and Paul had met at a bluegrass concert. That seemed suspicious. Paul hates bluegrass. That must have been a lie. So why was she making up a cover story? Interesting.

The next week I told my parents that for school I needed to take one of those cool ancestry tests to learn about my background. They found this extremely odd.

"What kind of school project is this?"

"Do we really have to pay for that?"

They were using money as a coverup. I *knew* why they really didn't want me to use one. But I played along. I just said it was a project about DNA and our family tree and that I would help pay for it. They seemed okay with the idea. On the outside that is. I'm sure on the inside they were punching a wall. I had completely cornered them! The lab results were coming back today, and finally I will know my real dad. Even if he isn't alive today, at least I'll have the truth.

The only problem is that Michael Jackson died 3 years before I was born. This is definitely a flaw in my theory, and I've yet to come up with an explanation for this. But then again what's a good theory without a couple of pot holes?

Mia Tan

Age: 17, Grade: 12

School Name: Mills Godwin High School, Richmond, VA

Educators: Christine Maddox, Stephen Wozny

Category: Poetry

A Sister's Departure

Flight in an hour. First goodbye in the living room.
I train my eyes on the weighing scale.

I steady my suitcase—it refuses to stay still.
Wheels on the scale on the cherrywood floor.

Tonight's verdict will show how well
I have wrangled myself, small enough for the wind

to ferry me away. I have shoved my belongings
between zipper-toothed jaws—the suitcase chokes

on my clothes, my pallid photographs—
I have wrapped the Littles Ones' paper necklaces

and Mama's jade earrings into the bodice of a dress,
cinched silk like a cheap apology.

I weigh all that I have
but my words.

Little Ones, if only I could pass a piece of myself
down to you,

not just stories.
Something to hold onto.

Or leave my fingerprints in your hair
like indents on the couch.

Stone-lipped, I have cut every photograph
so that I could fit more.

I keep only their young, olive faces in color.
Even once I am buckled in the air,

I want to carry them in my pocket
and resin my skin with paper. Hold their faces

up against glass as the sky fogs
beside my palm.

With numb fingers, I have packed the winter coat
that I will use in my new home.

How pompous the fur looked when we bought it
that day Manila seemed to burst under the sun.

How the rich wool surrounded
you, a monarch's robe

—now, the coat is a schooner
that could sink me whole.

I learn to propel myself
through water, a fist to carve salt.

Starving as the last creature on Earth.
One day, when my limbs are remade

with porcelain, I'll return to the waves
and glide in Mama's kitchen again.

This time,
I'd swallow meals instead of memories.

The suitcase drifts.
The scale's needle rises—

a wagging, bloodied finger.

A hairsbreadth
of seismic proportions.

As my sight becomes jaundiced,
I think of how calmly I could sip jasmine tea

on the plane, balancing my cup
as the engine fires.

I would keep the blinds down,
lull as the engine screeches over the city.

Past budding streets,
past trees wrapped in constellations,

the blades would spew ash over the city's
golden eyelids, crescendo past the house,

the kitchen window,
the parchment screens that bleed,

past erupting Earth,
fracturing floorboards, smashed clock—

I pull the suitcase off the scale.

I am swollen with home.

My body brims, never enough
space.

All the miles to the airport,
the sun's residue trails me. Shadows

dampen my face. I search
for solid ground.

Little Ones, though I have left,
this is my heirloom to you:

The instinct of sun-touched skin
to reach for more light.

That hour, I wanted to look
when you gathered around me,

lying on the floor in your night clothes,
dragging stuffed animals at your heels.

I wanted to burn
your faces into my skull.

Living, lived-in room.

No language could ever smooth
my goodbyes into sense. I try again:

You propped stuffed animals
onto the weighing scale,

their fur coats well-worn,
almost gone.

Toy bodies leaning on each other
like stilts of an old home,

bahay kubo, light as rain.
You offered them to me.

I wanted to take them,
but they were voluminous—

when I tried to carry them,
they spilled out

like oceans
from my arms.

Mia Tan

Age: 17, Grade: 12

School Name: Mills Godwin High School, Richmond, VA

Educators: Christine Maddox, Stephen Wozny

Category: Poetry

Haibun for My Neighbor

All the kettles, all the windows are open in her house.

She throws them open like invitations, wisps condensing
and falling like lemon droplets across the grass—I follow
the steam, the golden ladder of windows. Up the driveway,
I catch the scent like dewdrops until my cupped palms brim
and water carves distant continents of my thumbs.

Inside, I scrape dinner from a red-flowered bowl. She beams

at me across the kitchen, silver hair weeping over her shoulders.

Her English is a string of lights, looped and bobbing through

the house. Her voice is a satellite swept wide, searching the ceiling,
the gaping windows, for more light. She speaks of Nicaragua.

She speaks of a neighborhood like a song where people dip in
just to dance. Her hands swirl over the stove. The steam curls again,
up the bare walls, coloring off-white paint with the kitchen's scent.

Some nights, there is only the skin of our feet against

the coarse blue court. We toss a tennis ball higher than the trees.

Its green body arcs, so aloft it could sail.

Forehead knit, she surveys her home, shifting unpacked boxes

around until the arrangement feels like a waltz.

Moved in two years ago, she tells me. Still, she walks across

the room as if on a tightrope. Barren floor like ice. I picture

what her room could be, settled in. A haven where rumpled shirts

are lost and rarely found. Where crude, hand-drawn cards
topple from bookshelves, burst from the house like ivy.

As we stand on the sidewalk, fleeting headlights score

our faces with distortion. She traces her city into the dirt.

Her touch reminds me: even thin paper holds

a friend's touch. I carry it—each unaltered smudge.

Fractured speech is warm

on our tongues, this window light—

a foreigner's home.

Mia Tan

Age: 17, Grade: 12

School Name: Mills Godwin High School, Richmond, VA

Educators: Christine Maddox, Stephen Wozny

Category: Poetry

Bedside Promises

Mornings, Earth cried fire
into our hands,
and we wrapped nylon sheets over
the welts and burns,
laid him
down
to suction stray roots
out of his
weak,
teething hold.
We palpated the skyline,
vertebrae of leaves,
and brushed aside gray webs,
pupils leaden beneath.
Lances penetrated
from cracks in his skin,
and melting caps succumbed to shock
and it was apology we wrapped
in our hands—
the stammers of a flail wing,
the human,
panicky heart.
Mornings, we viewed the sky.
We balanced porcelain cups
between
the silence
and assured
ourselves, *Someday*,
the awash will find a shore.
Dirt will tend lost life into purpose.
In those mornings, Earth
reaches across railings
to squeeze our aching,
blue gloves,
he spins
past broken breathing machines
and twisted scalpels.
Past this bygone room,
where an empty window frame
stands guard—
fixed in its grief—and curtains
pay their respects on the floor.
Past coffee beans that mourn

as they spill
from a half-tied veil,
silver droplets
fill the lines of our palms,
and in dawn's salute
we sow
our tears—
salt into the wounded
ground.

Audrey Weisenberger

Age: 17, Grade: 11

School Name: Henrico High School Center for the Arts, Richmond, VA

Educator: Nicholas Ingraham

Category: Poetry

Is This Suicide?

I pop prescribed pills
One two three more
Ask me why
Why!
I travel to death's door
A gram a night
Is that alright?
Laugh as I do until
Your only sustenance spills out
Through your eyes
When I cry
I taste chemicals that create me
A bit too much?
Oh, just one more taste will satisfy
I like laboratory experiments
More than I love myself
If you hurt, you must stop!
It will hurt more, hence I cannot!
Artificial people see more color
Is it still suicide
If I know I am killing myself
In amounts too small for anyone
To count?
My rhyme scheme is skewed
Don't push me through
This dark space
Yes! I live here
And I cannot afford another home
A space that turns my brain to
Oh! to nothing.
I cannot learn of the good
Nor can I remember the bad
Simple words and simple sounds
It is not an Ego Death.
I am more alive than before
I know too little to want to die
Is this suicide?

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Category: Humor

Summer Fun

Summer Fun

Screams came from every direction. My cousin flew to the left and my brother to the right. My hands were shaking, and I didn't know if I would make it out alive. I felt a sense of overwhelming despair as if I had just broken my nail. I regretted not spending more time with my grandparents during our holiday dinners. I panicked like when you realize you have one day left of summer to read all of Frankenstein and complete your math work on polar curves. I needed my family to know I loved them before I was gone.

Every summer my family partakes in the brutal sport of tubing. My frequent tubing partners are my two cousins, Grace and Ashley. Each trip, the skin on my hands and elbows falls off, I find 37 new bruises, and I hobble down the stairs afterward as if I was hit by a moped. My battle wounds were so frightful that one time a nurse asked me, "Is everything okay at home? Would you like me to call someone? It's okay to be honest." I then explained the wounds came from me sliding around on some plastic called a tube. I haven't fallen off the tube since I was six, excluding when the tube flips. Because of my outstanding grip strength, I always told my family that I was going to join the 2020 Olympic Tubing Team if they ever had one.

However, my achievement also put a target on my back. My sister became determined to throw me off and break my long-lasting record. She drove the jet ski in circles for about five straight minutes. I screamed at her to stop. My brother who was impatiently floating in the water was also screaming at my sister, albeit for a very different reason. The waves were probably 20 feet tall give or take about 16 feet. The tube approached the biggest wave I've ever seen on the James River, which seemed even taller than my 6'1" frame. The tube flipped over, but I kept holding on. I felt the water pushing against my face, as my fingers struggled to stay curled on the handles. As I wrestled with the water, fighting to breathe, my sister finally noticed and stopped the jet ski. I must have been underwater for hours. I came up gasping for air feeling like I climbed Mt. Everest and ran a marathon all in one day. I still tell the story today, but my sister always interjects that I was underwater for maybe four seconds.

Each summer, my cousins and I commit to a pact that claims if one falls off, all jump off as well. This pact stems from the indescribable fear you get while floating in the middle of the murky river wondering which monster will eat you. A 10-foot catfish? The Lochness monster? A man-eating stingray? No one knows. This is why those dark depths have always haunted me, especially after watching River Monsters on Animal Planet almost every week when I was younger. One time when Grace fell off, I proceeded to fly across the tube to the side she left, and I accidentally elbowed Ashley in the face. There was blood gushing everywhere. Another tubing casualty. People say blood is the strongest bond, but I believe the bonds created during the struggle to stay on the inner tube are stronger. I've never felt so grateful than when Ashley later grabbed my life jacket as I was about to faceplant off the tube shortly after I elbowed her.

Tubing has taught me to never give up even in the face of a tsunami, the importance of friendship, and not to hold grudges. In the end, our stories, common experiences, and perhaps our bruises have fortified relationships amongst my family from our summer fun that has lasted throughout the seasons.