Creative Writing

Talented young writers were invited to submit their most creative compositions in recognition of the legacy of creativity pioneer E. Paul Torrance. Over the past seven years, the International Torrance Legacy Creative Writing Awards competition has attracted hundreds of young writers. They have written in two major categories: poetry and short story. In this seventh year of writing submissions, we were pleased to see evidence of student maturity and growth in writing, in composition as well as in depth of feeling and insight.

The participation of students represented ages 8-18. Submissions were evaluated and critiqued in four age-level categories, ages 8-10, 11-12, 13-15, 16-18. The themes elicited a wide range of expression of imagination, originality, and creativity. Submissions also reflected the diversity of environments, concerns, and talents of students, teachers, and parents throughout the United States and other parts of the world, including China, Kingdom of Bahrain, New Zealand, Poland, Singapore, and South Korea.

A panel of four judges, comprised of teachers, authors, and editors in the Chicago area, evaluated and assessed the effectiveness of the student poetry and stories. They were Janet Bartell, Chairman; Nancy Messman, Co-Chairman; Elizabeth Brown; and Sarah von Fremd. All commended the maturity and creativity evident in the students’ writing. The judges used rubrics to judge the poetry as well as the stories. Rubric categories for short stories included organization and flow, character development, language expression, originality and insight, and plot development. The rubric used to evaluate the poetry included the criteria of originality and depth, elaboration and articulation, emotional expressiveness, imagery, and unity and cohesiveness.

Joan Franklin Smutny
Director of International Torrance Legacy Creativity Awards and Creative Writing
Director of the Center for Gifted / Midwest Torrance Center for Creativity
Creative Writing ~ Ages 8 – 10

POETRY

First Place

Snehal Choudury – Age 10
Canton, Ohio, U.S.A.
“New World”

Second Place

Liam Goodowens – Age 10
Winter Park, Florida, U.S.A.
“Entering the Light”

Third Place

Deena Al-Dahwi – Age 9
Manama, Kingdom of Bahrain
“Superpowers? If only...”

Lilo Al-Dahwi – Age 9
Manama, Kingdom of Bahrain
“Dauntless Daredevil of Niagra”

STORIES

First Place

Ella Guzman – Age 9
Norwood, New Jersey, U.S.A.
“The Feline Capers”

Grace Short – Age 10
Wroclaw, Poland
“A Big Adventure”

Second Place

Sarah Franco-Vila – Age 8
Key Biscayne, Florida, U.S.A.
“Indigo”

Third Place

Reese Wilson – Age 8
Norwood, New Jersey, U.S.A.
“200 Pounds of Gold”

Sahaj Vaghasia – Age 10
Norwood, New Jersey, U.S.A.
“The Goal”
I can barely wheeze out a sentence in English, my lips struggle to recite the alphabet. When I make a noise, it isn’t a word; it’s a sound of fear and humiliation. This rambling code tongue-twists me.

Back in India, chicken biryani was chock-full of spicy chilies, like alligator-infested waters. Just nearing my face made my eyes smart with tears. My tongue’s taste buds prolonged the unwanted presence of chili whenever it came in contact; I’d scream for a cooling raita.

Now, it’s the simpleton hamburgers, fries, and the elephantine-portioned milkshakes that taste like shortening. Full of grease, fat, and unwanted saltiness. My mouth aches and pleads for smoky paprika and pungent mustard powder. And I don’t eat at funky restaurants like McDonald’s, Burger King, and Wendy’s; I savor the most delicious butter chicken and palak paneer back at my haven home.

Girls strut fancily, noses arched snootily, feet clacking like potential missiles. I wear dingy, golden, clingy bangles on my wrist, shining carnation red, robin’s egg blue, and chick yellow, making me feel I’m not elegant compared to those fashion models.

My brain spins a cyclone every minute, trying to work a simple problem, wondering about an advanced topic, or basically thinking, like gears rotating to operate.

People think I’m peculiar in ways, probably due to the way I eat, drink, and speak, or even the way I do simple everyday tasks.

While I write two page equations for one amateur problem, my peers do the dinkiest, most shortcut methods of math for the same thing; I always feel peer-pressed by my peers that way.

People push me around like I’m a doggy chew toy, giving me silence because I’m diverse, but I’m confident soon I’ll be used to their social ways I won’t even bother.

With the lack of friendships and a surplus of loneliness that I have, I hope life goes smooth and tranquil for a ten year old immigrant: me.
Lying in the empty darkness of night  
My mind’s desert winds blow.  
All I do is think and think and think  
... I hope I will dream of home.

In the night – when I fight myself  
chasing demons down the avenues of weird  
I feel you shining bright – beckoning me forward toward the light  
... and then you simply ask

WHAT ABOUT TOMORROW?

The night races past  
But for me it lasts forever.  
I know that time is relative  
Yeah, it's relatively slow!

It's just my thoughts that keep me hoping  
Hoping for more TOMORROW.

And when tomorrow becomes tonight  
and I think my day wasn't right  
or there could’ve been more  
or I might have lost sight  
I am consoled: IN TOMORROW!

Niagra Falls' Daredevil... Annie Taylor was her name,  
The reason for her audacious risk... Was seeking fortune and fame!

Soaring over the magnificent Falls’... Whose height looms 188 feet,  
This impossible task the bold woman led... Was nothing anyone could beat!

Most women her age were retired... and there were limits to women's rights too,  
The insurmountable task she set was death-defying... at the age of 62!

Ms. Annie was a teacher... Very intelligent indeed,  
She graduated with honors... And she absolutely loved to read!

Native Americans used to stunt over the Falls... To prove their bravery and strength, too,  
But in 1901, Annie was the 1st ever Daredevil... proving there was nothing women cannot do!

Strangely, Annie brought her cat... Nobody knew why at all,  
Poor cat was as frightened as mice of her... Of falling from something astronomically tall!

So climbing into an airtight barrel... Risking all she was worth,  
She hurdled over the treacherous waters... And became the Daredevil of the earth!

Most people doubted her... Thought it was her last,  
5,000 people died... Stunting over the Thundering Waters so vast!

Alas, the men reeled her barrel in... Thinking Annie would be dead,  
Instead, they found she was victorious... Though bruised from toe to head!

Fame and fortune, Annie sought... but none of that came true,  
Years later she died in poverty... What bleakness she went through!

And that's the tale of Annie Taylor... A courageous, daring soul,  
I hope women can be dauntless like her... Conquer the universe or just the Super Bowl!
Superpowers? If only…
By Deena Al-Dahwi
Age 9
Manama, Kingdom of Bahrain
Third Place Tie

If only I had Superpowers,
Defeating evil that’s for me,
Helping destitute people,
That’s the sort I’d like to be,

Heat Breath, Ice Breath, or Supersonic Speed,
Also Telekinesis… which to choose?
Distinctive, and different in many ways…
But all so cool, and fascinating to use!

I would practice with Heat Breath for melting objects,
Pranking my twin would top my list,
I would suddenly blast a bonfire,
She would be shocked, as the fire cracked and hissed!

Using my Ice Breath, I could freeze my lemonade,
And freeze robbers, before they make a scandal,
Zooming, Blocking, and Securing,
With Ice Breath, I would be able to handle!

My mother always nurtured us all,
Championing, caring, working tirelessly and keen,
Finally, it would be my turn to help her,
With Superpowers I’d make the house spotless, and clean,

Although I would assist my mother,
There’s something Superpowers can never replace,
It’s the affection and kisses my mom always gives,
From the warm hugs, to the smile on her face!

I’ve always wanted to make a difference,
For the homeless and for the needy,
So if I had Telekinesis,
I could nourish and support them, super speedy!

It fractures my heart to see those solemn little faces,
Stick figures from head to toe,
When I have heaps of things,
And they hardly have anything, so…

I’d use Telekinesis to build houses for the poor,
Teleporting around the world from door-to-door,
Houses fit for kings… the chance for a better start,
From Asia to Africa to everywhere, and more…

When I grow up, I intend to achieve,
Powers aren’t always the cure,
I intend to achieve academically,
Not only consuming Powers… that’s for sure

I wouldn’t do anything wrong with Powers,
Or use them to get good grades,
I would use them for the famished and the helpless,
Definitely not for schoolwork aides!

Helping, supporting, providing, caring,
That’s what my Superpowers will be all about…

If only I had Superpowers…
The Feline Capers
by Ella Guzman
Age 9
Norwood, New Jersey, U.S.A.
First Place Tie

Sally the alley cat looked around at her friends. They were all in bad shape. They had bald spots on them and were starving and cold. They needed a warm place to live and care to go with it. The kind family that had cared for Sally, Julia, and Handel had no choice but to leave after a ruthless storm left them in a dark and vicious flood. They had narrowly escaped tragedy and were scavenging for all they had lost. As they were seeking food in a dumpster, a car whizzed by, its lights glaring down at them. Sally saw Julia glance up at it and then roll her eyes. “What?” Sally asked.

“Just how do people move around in those things?” Julia thought aloud.

“Those things,” Handel groaned, “are cars.”

“Why can’t we operate them?” Julia asked, already knowing the answer. Handel ignored her and continued searching for food.

Suddenly, an idea popped into Sally’s head. “Or can we?” Sally wondered. “If humans can, maybe we can, too. Maybe we just have to try.”

Handel cocked his head and slyly asked, “What are you thinking?”

“Nothing much,” Sally sighed.

Julia was getting interested and asked, “What?”

“Well, I was thinking about what you said. Maybe we can,” Sally replied. She explained how they might find a kind and loving family by using a car. They were too hungry and slow to go far by foot. Even healthy, well-fed cats were not built for such long distances. Handel and Julia were convinced.

Over the next few days, the cats carefully observed how when the inside wheel of a car turned, the wheels on the outside turned, too, making a car change direction.

Early one morning, the three cats rushed to a busy mall parking lot and waited for the first car to arrive. Soon after, it did. But, they could not get in. Within a few hours, the parking lot was almost full, and there was no luck to be found until a candy apple red car rolled into one of the last spots. A fancily dressed man stepped out, wildly talking, pointing, and waving at his car. “Is it locked?” Sally asked Handel.

“No!” Handel whispered back. Sally signaled to Julia. Julia nodded and sprang up on the hood of the car and gracefully locked the doors. The man in blue gained on them. Roaring sirens invaded the streets as a wild chase had officially begun.

As the candy apple red car zoomed right and left, the cars with flashing lights did their best to follow, but they weren’t as fast. The loud cars eventually ran out of gas, but luckily for the cats, their car was electric. Fortunately, they came to a restaurant with a space in the back where their car could fit in without being noticed.

The car pulled in and the three cats hopped out. Julia, Sally, and Handel crept into the kitchen and saw a man wearing a tall white hat and apron, cooking something that smelled delicious. The cats’ mouths were watering. Handel couldn’t help but steal a bite. He flattened himself and crept along the floor, snatching a morsel of food from a plate that was waiting to be served. A waiter walking by with a gigantic pile of yummy treats stopped on Sally’s tail and that’s when the real drama started. Sally turned and batted him with her paw, causing him to get scared and slip on a small spill on the ground. Handel was startled by the noise and turned to see the waiter trying to catch Sally. Julia angrily jumped on the counter and sprung onto the waiter’s head. Handel also chased the waiter. That’s where things went crazy.

The waiter started screaming. The cats thought that something dangerous had scared him, so they ran from the kitchen into the dining room. The man with the tall white hat followed, shouting and trying to smack the cats with his spatula. A man in blue who had been chasing them earlier saw them and stood in their way. The cats froze. They looked back and forth between the man in blue and the man with the tall white hat. The man in blue was about to grab the cats when something amazing happened. A girl leapt in his way. Her arms were outstretched and her face was brave.

“Stop!” she cried.

“Step aside,” he ordered.

“No,” she firmly replied, “You are not going to take them away. They are mine,” she blurted.

“These cats are trouble. Just let me take them, and go back to your parents,” the man in blue calmly said, expecting her to let him do his job.

But she was firm and stayed. “You can’t take my cats,” she replied.

The man in blue looked back and forth between the girl and the cats. He saw how determined the girl was to help them. The cats looked up at him with pleading eyes, and he saw how badly they needed a good home. “OK,” the man in blue finally decided, “they are your cats.”

With that, the brave girl took Handel, Sally, and Julia outside. She promised to take care of them forever, and she did. The returned the candy apple red car, and the owner generously forgave them. He was glad to be a part of a happy ending for a family. The people in blue were no longer after the cats, and all was well.

Sally the cat looked around at her friends. They were all in great shape. Their bald spots had grown back, and they were no longer starving and scavenging everything they saw for what they had lost. They found all they could have wished for. If tragedy ever threatened again, they knew that they could survive. Together. They were, they are, and they always will be. So, if you ever see a car driving by with just two pairs of cat ears sticking up, don’t be surprised. It’s Julia, Sally, and Handel taking a spin in their car.
It all started a while back when I was training with my mum to ride horses. Well, you see, my family owns a circus, and my mum and I do an act together on horseback. We are the stars of the show. My whole family are in the circus. My father is the ringmaster, my uncles are the clowns, my cousins are the acrobats, and even my aunts sell tickets and popcorn. I have a little sister, Betsy; she is desperate to be part of the show with her own act together with her pet monkey, Banana. Unfortunately, she is too small and he is too naughty. She is very jealous of me and my act with our mum.

My mum and I perform our act on the horses with no saddles. We do tricks as they gallop around the circus ring. I love my life with the circus; it’s full of wonder and surprise. Some people would think it was crazy, but for me it is normal. It is all I’ve ever known.

So, like I said, I was training with my mum on our horses. I was riding Maggie, my fabulous dapple grey pony, when there was a loud crash behind us. Betsy had slammed shut her Banana's cage. The noise had scared Maggie, and she bolted out of the ring. Before I knew it, I had been thrown off and was lying on the floor. The last thing I remember was my mum screaming, “Someone call a doctor!”

After what seemed like days, but was only a few hours, I woke up in hospital. I was surrounded by my family, still dressed in their circus clothes. I felt content and safe seeing them, although I am sure it looked very peculiar to any passers-by. The doctor said I was badly bruised and needed to rest for a few days. But this meant I would miss the next few shows with Maggie! Betsy volunteered as quick as anything to take my place, but mum said she was still too young.

That night I sat amongst the audience, watching my family perform. It was painful, and not just the bumps and bruises, but watching them all out in the ring. They looked so happy. It was where I belonged. I left the Big Top and made my way to my wagon. In the wagon was an old chest full of “family treasures”. I always like to look through this chest. Inside the bottle was a rolled up piece of paper. I unrolled it and realized it was a map. Hold on a minute! This must be the map that Granny is always telling us stories about. Apparently this map shows the way to a great treasure. My grandpa, who disappeared years he had been living in this cave. He had found the travelling your grandpa. Would you like some tea?”

The old man chuckled. “You silly old sausage, I am your grandpa. Granny did not agree and stayed with the circus. So, the treasure we found was not gold or the usual treasure, but my long lost Grandpa. We pleaded with him, and he agreed to come and visit the circus and our family again. Everyone was overjoyed to see him – especially Granny.

That night there was a big party. Even Betsy and I became friends again. Granny and Grandpa talked all through the night. Next morning, Granny announced to us all that she would stay with Grandpa when the circus moved on. She had realized she needed Grandpa more than the circus.

From then on, every time the circus returned to Loch Kilgour, we visited Granny and Grandpa at their lakeside home.
Bernard felt the summer wind blowing through his hair while driving in his mom's Porsche with the top down. It was a summer afternoon and the sun was burning through the clouds. Bernard loved being with his mom. She was full of energy, beautiful, and young. He was having a birthday party at the water park. They were headed to the bakery in the beach village outside LA to pick up the cake. Bernard was turning seven. His parents were almost always working at the hospital, even in the summer, so this was a special day.

His parents were deeply in love. They met at work. His mom was a cancer doctor – the surgical kind. She took tumors out of people. Those are bad cells that pile up. They want eternal life and end up killing their person and themselves instead. Bernard's dad was a neurologist. He was quiet, older than his mom and very serious.

His mom began to park on the side of the road and all of a sudden the road was on the dashboard of the car! Then, there were three blue flashes and a tree falling to his left side. “MAMA!”

Bernard woke up confused. He heard familiar sounds, but he was sure not at home. It was the hospital. Even though his eyes were opened, he could not see. His dad was nearby; he heard his soft voice. Bernard could only recall three blue lights – they felt intense inside his head, and then there was silence, peace. Maybe he was dead? Something was different. He had a monster headache on the left side. “Bernard?” his father approached. “Bernard, we are so glad you are here. We thought you would not wake up.” His father told him he was in a deep sleep for several days. Dr. Wrigley, the neurosurgeon that was Bernard's godfather operated on him. He predicted that right eye vision would return, but they could not save the other eye.

There had been an earthquake – only three minutes. His mom was dead on arrival to the hospital. Her head was split by a monster headache on the left side. “Bernard?” his father approached. “Bernard, we are so glad you are here. We thought you would not wake up.” His father told him he was in a deep sleep for several days. Dr. Wrigley, the neurosurgeon that was Bernard's godfather operated on him. He predicted that right eye vision would return, but they could not save the other eye.

By Sarah Franco-Vila
Age 8
Key Biscayne, Florida, U.S.A.

Second Place

Bernard asked Jan if she could help him be a volunteer until school started. He said he was afraid they might not want him. Jan told him he was a survivor and needed to be proud of what he came through.

Larry was the lead trainer, and he liked Jan. Bernard knew though, that his dad also kind of liked her even though all he did was work and he stopped talking to anyone. The first day came, and Bernard was shy and felt awkward. Larry was jolly and made him laugh. He brought him to the baby dolphins and taught them tricks. Bernard kept hearing clicks and echoes, then the dolphins would yelp. Larry said, “That’s some good old echolocation, Bernard, you should look into that.”

When Jan picked up Bernard and brought him home, he took out his computer and started googling. “Echolocation sends waves which bounce off fat-filled cavities, and when the sound waves hit an object, they return to the dolphin and show it the bone structure, size, shape, and overall picture of the object with which the dolphin is about to come into contact.” Bernard felt so happy he started crying. He understood why he saw “blueprints” of objects on one side of his head – the one in which he was blind, and the blue flashes changed him. He realized the power he felt from being able to navigate was similar to the dolphins’ echolocation! He wanted to find Larry and see if it was possible.

When he got to Larry, Larry said, “Well, darn Bernard, you would know better than me. I see 20/20. Maybe you are onto something.

The next day, Larry introduced Bernard to Indigo, the dolphin he first admired. Bernard was fascinated. Larry wondered about echolocation and Bernard's question. Larry was handy and helped Bernard design a device that could measure how humans could adapt echolocation by using a part of the brain that reacts fast to trauma. Bernard recorded the dolphins’ “clicks” and put some things that looked like head phones on Indigo. It was capturing that one moment where it echo-locates and replaying it. He did this thousands of times. Bernard put special ear buds into a tape of the dolphin clicks and sold it at the stadium to people who were interested in this trait that was supposed to be unique to dolphins.

Everyone wanted to buy the ear buds. The money was donated to research. Bernard's dad and Larry started a foundation for blind children. They tested the echo-locator to help kids adapt to sudden blindness. They also taught kids born blind to adapt to something that was already part of their brains. His dad went to neurosurgery conferences. Everyone’s purpose in life became clear. Bernard's dad became more how he had remembered him before his mom died. Jan moved into the house, and they got engaged. Larry and Bernard worked together every day after school with the dolphins. The beautiful Hawaiian sun shone on everything. The foundation was named after the dolphin who taught Bernard about the power to overcome adversity: INDIGO (Institute for Neuro-Developmental Initiatives Giving Opportunities). It was dedicated to his mother. Bernard built a better tomorrow, and the echo-locator helped “open people's eyes” to an adaptable human “sixth sense”.

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Jan introduced Bernard to a guy with a flowered shirt and a big smile. He was called Larry. The smile was almost like the sun – Bernard could feel it better than he could see it. Bernard asked Jan if she could help him be a volunteer until school started. He said he was afraid they might not want him. Jan told him he was a survivor and needed to be proud of what he came through.

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One day in New York, there was a young boy named James Kondsan. He was buying a Play-station 4 online with his savings. James was really excited for it to come in. But when his mother called him for supper, James raced out of his room, then slid down the swirling banister and sat down at the head of the table. James knew his mother was making his favorite, spaghetti with meatballs. While James was eating, his father was reading the news with a worried look on his face.

“Honey,” he said, “a man stole 200 pounds of gold from the jewelry store down the block.”

“Oh, my, that is dreadful. Do you remember when James was a baby and they used to give him bananas? They were such good people, that’s a shame,” she said.

James thought and thought all night how to help the store. He even had a dream about it! Finally, he woke up, got dressed, brushed his teeth, combed his hair, and ran into the kitchen to eat breakfast where he stated a solution. “I have decided to donate half of my savings to the jewelry store and buy a laptop instead.”

“Oh, that is so sweet, James!” said his mother.

“Good job, that is a manly move, James,” said his father.

James was proud of himself, but thought it wasn’t quite enough. That afternoon, James was riding home on his bike, still thinking about the robbery. As he was riding home, he saw something suspicious in the apartment complex up the block. It was such a beautiful day out, but one of the units had windows that were closed, with shades and curtains blocking so nobody could see inside. But James thought he saw a shimmer.

As soon as he got home, he asked his parents if he could play outside, and they said yes. Instead of playing, he got a disguise at “Costume Crumble” and walked through town to the man with the closed window’s apartment building. James walked into the lobby. Shivers were sent down his spine. The man at the front counter asked James two things, why was he so short, and what was he doing here. James answered the questions in a gruff, manly voice. “One, it’s genetics, and it’s not nice to tease someone about how they are shorter than you, and two, I am a plumber, and I need to work somewhere on the seventh floor.” James didn’t know which room number because he would figure it out by looking for something shimmering through the eyeholes in people’s doors. Anyway, he got into the elevator and pushed number 7.

On the way up, James checked his Pokemon watch. “4:37, Mother will be calling me for dinner really soon,” James thought. (DING) The elevator doors opened. James raced out and started peeking through door holes. At last he found it, room 68. It was locked, but James didn’t give up. He tried it open with a… BOBBY PIN!

He broke in and lifted about 199 pounds of gold. (James is seven, AND takes karate, wrestling, football, and lifts a 50-pound weight twice every day, so don’t get too jealous.) He didn’t have enough time to lift the last pound before the door squeaked open.

James quickly hid in the shower and gently lowered the 199 pounds of gold onto the damp floor. Good thing the man didn’t notice that there was only one pound left. He adjusted the couch cushions and then sat down in front of the television. While he was watching the show “The Taste”, James took a quick run for it. He quietly sneaked out of the bathroom, grabbed the last pound of gold, and crept out of the apartment like a mouse.

Then James went back into the elevator and pushed the lobby button. He ran out of the door before the man behind the counter could say a word. He quickly sprinted down the street to the jewelry store.

As soon as he stepped inside, Mrs. Jones ran up to him and took the gold out of his hands. She put it behind the counter and grabbed something from underneath it. It was a chocolate covered banana! James ate it up in a millisecond as soon as Mrs. Jones handed it to him.

“James, you don’t know what you just did! You saved the jewelry store! We were just about to close it down because of the robbery. Here, take these chocolate covered bananas home with you,” she said with a smile.

“Why, thank you. But speaking of home, I have to get back for dinner. It’s 6:00 p.m., and my parents must be worried sick. We would love to have you over though,” Mrs. Jones responded.

Mrs. Jones ended up saying yes, and they both went over to James’ house. When they reached the house, James’ mother opened the door, and they all sat down at the dining room table. James explained why he was so late and why Mrs. Jones came over. They had fun listening and telling the story.

That night, when the sun lowered onto the wet grass, James was in his pajamas, lying in bed. His neighbors were screaming at the top of their lungs and giggling outside. They were having a late cookout. James couldn’t go to sleep, so he took out his journal and this is what he wrote...

June 7, 2015

Today was one of the best days of my life. Today, I saved a jewelry store, I had a special dinner with Mrs. Jones, and I saved 200 pounds of gold from being stolen, that would have been spent on silly junk. You have got to admit, I had a pretty good day.

-James Kondsan, age 7
The Goal
by Sahaj Vaghasia
Age 10
Norwood, New Jersey, U.S.A.
Third Place Tie

Today is the day! I couldn’t fall asleep last night thinking about the ways to outsmart the players on the undefeated soccer team. Our coach said that we have been training for this day the whole season. He said that every game we played till now was a learning experience. Today we are playing the best team in the league.

I got up with butterflies in my stomach and a determination to win. As I was eating my breakfast, I kept going over the moves in my head. I kept thinking if just playing harder and smarter would be enough to defeat this team. I knew that there were times on the field where I could have been braver and more aggressive, but I just chickened out. After the game, I would ask myself why I didn’t go with my gut instinct.

As my dad and I drove to the soccer field, I made a promise to myself that I would push myself harder than I ever had. I kept asking myself what was the worst that could happen? Get a yellow card? Worse yet, get a red card? Give a penalty shot to the other team? I had to win this game for me.

As my dad pulled into the parking spot, I was lost in thought and didn’t realize that one of my teammates was waiting for me. He seemed excited to play, and I felt nervous. We both started warming up on the field, and we tried not to tire ourselves out. We took shots on each other, and we made some, and we missed some. Finally, our coach and all of my other teammates came. Our coach made us do some exercises to warm up our bodies.

The referee had to check us in to see if we had all our gear on, such as shin guards, and we all were the correct age for the team. He looked at all the players’ cards and checked us to see if we were properly suited in our uniforms. After warming up for half an hour, the game was about to start. We were all looking forward to playing, and more importantly, winning this game. The referee blew the whistle, and the game began!

They had the ball first, which was a little bit of an advantage for us because in the second half, we knew that we would get the ball first. All of these players were much taller and bigger than me. But, that didn’t stop me from stealing the ball away from them. I was playing defense, and I had to be brave, and my main job was to not let them score.

As the coach substituted my teammates and me, I had time to watch the other players and get a sense of the weaknesses and strengths while I was on the bench. Sweat was dripping down my face, and it felt like it was 100 degrees, but I wanted to go back on the field! There were some close shots that the other team took, but they luckily missed. Before I knew it, we were thirty minutes into the game, and the score was still tied at zero. The referee blew the whistle, and it was half time.

Our coach had said that this was an amazing half. We had to be strong and not give up any goals, and to our advantage, the other team had no substitutions. That meant if we kept passing the ball the other team is most likely going to chase it. And in this heat, they are going to tire out and burn out. The other team was already on the field, and the referee beckoned us to come on the field.

We had the ball first. The forward passed the ball backwards to me. I passed to the center back, and he booted the ball up. Everyone had to push up including the goalie. The other team intercepted the big kick, and they dribbled up the field. I stole the ball and took the ball down the sideline. I crossed it to the other side, and my friend fired a shot at the goal. The goalie punched the ball, and I had rebounded it.

All the spectators were screaming my name. I took a shot, and GOAL! I had scored! Everyone was cheering! It was probably the best goal of the season. The game finally ended, and we shook hands. We said good game to them, and they said the same back. The score was 0-1. We had won! We were the first place team, and it was the best game I probably had ever played. After we were done, we got popsicles.

After the game, my coach had the usual post-game talk with us. The coach said that we all did an amazing job and that we were going to move up to the A flight because we had proved to him that we worked as a team. All the players gave me a “Chinese Tunnel”, and when I went through it, they smacked me with respect. The Chinese Tunnel is only meant for the MVP. It felt odd going through the tunnel. I knew that the team was honoring me for being quick and fast, but to me, it was more than that. In this game, I finally got the courage to go with my gut instinct, something I have struggled with in all my games. Both my mom and my dad congratulated me, and I hugged them. They said that they were very proud of me, and they felt I had grown, as I walked off the field.

We drove home, and I took off all my gear and just lay down. I thought about how brave I was in this game and how my amazing goal affected my team and the other team. I also learned that the coaches can coach and drill you, but it is up to the players to have faith in themselves. After a couple of minutes, I went to take a nice cold shower. I dried myself, combed my hair, and went downstairs to eat something. I had a glass of milk and cookies.

Later that day, I went outside to practice some cool soccer tricks. I learned a few, but I still had to try, try, and try. After that long day, I wanted to go to sleep even before eating my dinner. I will never forget the day that I was able to score the game-winning goal that led us to become the league champions.
Creative Writing ~ Ages 10 – 11

POETRY

First Place
Elise J. Weber – Age 12
Boca Raton, Florida, U.S.A.
“The Storm Within”

Second Place
Jessie Kim – Age 12
Norwood, New Jersey, U.S.A.
“A New Day”

Marlene Schaff – Age 12
Lake Forest, Illinois, U.S.A.
“Winter Poles”

Third Place
Lily Wu-Laudun – Age 11
Lafayette, Louisiana, U.S.A.
“Poems”

Sally Park – Age 12
Herndon, Virginia, U.S.A.
“Second Chance”

William Zhu – Age 11
Lincolnshire, Illinois, U.S.A.
“The Mountains”

Xavier Dickason – Age 11
Christchurch, New Zealand
“Outburst”

STORIES

First Place
Maya Hunter – Age 12
Centennial, Colorado, U.S.A.
“Do Widzena”

Second Place
Kayla Wisneski – Age 11
Lake Forest, Illinois, U.S.A.
“Grimm Brothers’ Brother”

Third Place
Marlene Schaff – Age 12
Lake Forest, Illinois, U.S.A.
“Kay and Letta”
Restless.
Pacing like an animal before a storm,
Telling myself I wouldn’t go,
But wanting to go to the dance.

Anxious.
Awkward social encounters,
Talking to people,
The only thing I could never do.
I’ll be okay, brushing the thought aside.

Anticipation.
My first formal event,
Curled hair pinned back, an orchid corsage,
A special dress the cerulean blue of a Maxfield Parrish painting.
Time spent with my only friend.

Panic.
I arrive passing through a reflective curtain into the darkness,
As if stepping into another dimension.
Blaring music, pulsating lights,
Surrounded by students I don’t really know,
Culminating in a prelude to a sensory perfect storm.

Flee.
I break through the doors,
Leaving the darkness behind the shimmering silver curtain.
Alone outside I will myself to breathe.
The deafening silence, the sweet smell of ozone,
Raindrops joining my own tears, streaming riverlets running down my face.

Comfort.
My friend appears from the darkness,
Hurt, confusion clouds his eyes.
Why did you leave?
You didn’t have to come.
I know, but I wanted to.

Calm.
We leave the dance for a better place,
Ice Cream in a park, wearing our formal attire.
Like two souls connecting along the way,
We talk, we laugh, me and my only friend.

The rain stops, droplets suspended from delicate leaves.
Time to go home.
I hug my friend good-bye.
The sky clears, calmness restored.
Gone is the storm within.
**A New Day**  
by Jessie Kim  
Age 12  
Norwood, New Jersey, U.S.A.  
*Second Place Tie*

The sky is an eerie gray.  
Traces of light escape through the bleak clouds.  
Heavy raindrops cascade,  
Drenched with sorrow and regret.  
Pounding against humanity,  
Tearing down the world,  
Blunt ears ignore the agonizing cries,  
Blinded eyes refuse to view the devastation.  
Only one light remains shining,  
Only one individual carries hope.  
Awakening life from its death,  
Restoring empathy.  
Evoking light,  
Breaking the dark abyss.  
Immersing the world with warmth,  
Demolishing the bitter cold.  
Dreams and hopes are spoken,  
Into the mere wisps of the wind.  
Each to be planted,  
And each to thrive.  
The silence of dawn abates,  
As billows of joyous laughter emerge.  
Previous sorrows are forgotten,  
As a new day rises.

**Winter Poles**  
by Marlene Schaff  
Age 12  
Lake Forest, Illinois, U.S.A.  
*Second Place Tie*

Stars twinkle in an ethereal sky  
Crystal-cut diamonds in endless deep blue  
Tundra glistens in a white coat  
Of downy, thick snow  
Animals’ criss-crossing tracks  
Mark the sparkling blanket of flakes  
Moon glows in the heavens  
A night sun  
Illuminating the still earth  
Glimmering, limpid, frozen pools  
Mirror the pin-pricked blue above  
As a mythical reflecting glass  
Biting air surreally clear  
Seems extraterrestrial  
Blurring nothing in this  
Magical midnight moment

**Poems**  
by Lily Wu-Laudun  
Age 11  
Lafayette, Louisiana, U.S.A.  
*Third Place Tie*

In your back pocket, they await  
Like a key kept unknown,  
Forgotten, with no door to unlock.  
They await.  

Instead a name no one remembers.  

They will have a purpose one day  
Those broken words, those scattered Phrases.  

But oh yes. They will come.  
But for now... They await.
Second Chance
by Sally Park
Age 12
Fairfax, Virginia, U.S.A.
Third Place Tie

Prisoner of my own soul
Chained by the grudges of the past
A single teardrop leaking
Representing my overwhelming guilt
Eyes brimmed with my regret

Hidden beneath the shadows of night
Lurking in the corners of midnight
The wrinkles of my past
Clinging on until the end

Peeking from the horizon
Was the symbol of hope and a future
In front of my prison bars
I was locked in my own shame

I thrust my hand out
Feeling the slightest glimpse of warm light
Reflecting off my damp cheek
No longer does the fear of truth linger on

Fists clenched with determination
I tore down the stonewall
Unleashing my unknown identity
Of whom I really am

I walked over the wall
Using it as a bridge
I soared through the sky
Up to the stars; I am limitless

Breezing through the gusts of wind
Chasing my dreams
The mists of doubts no longer have their effects
Because I am forgiven and reborn

The Mountains
by William Zhu
Age 11
Lincolnshire, Illinois, U.S.A.
Third Place Tie

The barren peaks stand overlooking the specter-grey trees
Shafts of light shine brightly on the craggy rocks
Creating peace in the dark days
Misty clouds cover the mountain tips
Zombie-white snow plies on the abyss-black mountains
Threatening a slow-moving avalanche
The swaying trees seem to be hovering in the breeze
A sun is missing from the scene, though the lances of light can be seen
Ashen rocks are jutting out from the mountains
Like boulders stuck inside the mountains
Snow slowly trickles downwards on the slope
Falling upon trees spread out across the base of the mountain

Outburst
By Xavier Dickason
Age 11
Christchurch, New Zealand
Third Place Tie

Tranquil morning
The world still sleeping
Everything's quiet
Suddenly... Pandemonium!
Shaking everywhere
Bookshelves chasing each other
Bed dancing to the music of the earth
Chimneys trying to kiss the ground.
Parents yelling “To the Doorway!”
The Earth screaming in its tantrum.
All of a sudden... quiet.
Stunned Silence fills the air.

Damaged houses populate the city
But we can rebuild
The sound of roadwork inhabits the metropolis.
Slowly but surely
The houses grow
Becoming bigger.
And the people return
With houses of steel
And their hearts broken
By the Earth’s Outburst.
Synagogue. Back then, I hated synagogue. I hated the seemingly endless train ride from the nearest city big enough to have a train, which happened to be Chrzanow. But that all changed on October 21, 1939, shortly before my eighth birthday.

I remember how proud I was of my synagogue clothes: crisp khaki pants that seemed to swim on my scrawny legs, paired with my clean, white flannel shirt. It was the last day I would wear that outfit. The last carefree day I would remember.

It was getting late, and my whole family was yelling for me to hurry up, but I hated synagogue, so I dawdled. “Kurt…pospiesz się!” my mom yelled. Hurry up!

I ran downstairs to where Karl – my twin – and my older sister, Miriam, were already ready and waiting. Hopping into the car for the train station, we drove the few miles to Chrzanow where we met up with my best friend, Raphael, and his family. I didn’t know it then, but this would be the last time we would ever see them. My mother handed a coin to the man standing in front of the train, and my family found its way to the wooden seats covered with worn gray cloth, across from Raphael and his family.

Looking back, I wish we had spoken, or joked around as we sometimes did. But on this afternoon, most of the ride was spent in silence, admiring the progressing scenery outside the cloudy, grimy windows. The world held a vibrancy it would soon lose: emerald green fields that melted into coyote-colored farms and amber-dotted suburbs. Soon we would reach what remained of the bustling city, crowded with shops trying to make a profit despite the invasion. I imagined my mother as part of that crowd: my eighth birthday was approaching, and she never failed to bring me a present as big as I was tall. With images of my birthday swirling in my head, the chronic hum of the engine lulled me to sleep.

That evening, after services and another train ride home, there was a thundering pounding at the door. My mom’s laughter vanished, and I saw panic flash across her face. She motioned for my father to leave the room. As quickly as the fear came, it was gone, but concealed behind the deep blue of her eyes, I saw it. Her face was serious, her body stiff. My father pulled Karl and me close, hidden safely behind him and out of view.

In our doorway stood a man in military uniform: a black suit dotted with shiny silver buckles. On his arm was a red band with a large white circle in the center, within which lived what looked like a black spider. I can’t recall if I was more afraid of the spider, the man, or of the terrifying change that came over my mother so suddenly. The soldier looked sharply around the room. We sunk into the shadows. Seeing no one, he looked back towards my mother.

He spoke in German, “Wir benötigen Deine Junges. Sie werden für einen guten Zweck ist. Wann können wir sie?” We need your boys. It is for a good cause. When can we take them? My mother let out a slight gasp, which she quickly stifled. If she was afraid, she hid it well.

Taking a breath, my mother courageously spoke back in Polish, our native language. “Tygodniu, tygodniu. Dajcie nam jeszcze tydzień.” Did my mother just tell him that he could have us in a week?! “Morgen Abend!” he shot back as he turned abruptly. Tomorrow night? Tomorrow he would return to take us? Where?

In my innocent state, I did not realize the soldier’s words were a death sentence. I ran to the window to watch him leave, noticing a flag identical to his armband hanging outside.

“Pack up your belongings. Any you wish to keep.” My mother’s tone was harsh, horrified, as she ordered us.

October 22, 1939
That morning, our family of five huddled around our kitchen table, our egg matzos smothered with butter. “We have to go,” my father told us, speaking Polish. “We have to go or we will all die. There is nothing here worth staying for if we have to put our lives in jeopardy for it.”

Even after a night’s rest, he sounded tired, exhausted, as he told us this news. I didn’t understand. Why did we need to run from this man, who only wanted us “for a good cause”? What about my friends? My home? My life? Just leave it behind? If there was danger, why couldn’t my parents, who had always protected me before, not keep me safe from it?

But the decision was made. We were leaving in two hours. Two hours to say goodbye. Somberly, I went upstairs and gathered my few clothes and stuffed them into a satchel along with my favorite toy train.

“Do widzenia.” Goodbye. “Do widzenia, lamp. Do widzenia, cozy warm quilt. I will miss you, comforting, small room.” I meandered down the stairs and out of the door, soaking up the images of home I would never see again. Do widzenia. I ran to my neighbors’ houses, giving them hugs and whispering do widzenia in their ears. They looked at me sorrowfully, hugging me back. Without words, they knew that we needed to leave, and why.

On my walk back home, the tears came flooding down, every tear a piece of my life being ripped from me, each something that I loved that I was forced to let go of. There would be no eighth birthday celebration for me. None for many years to come.

Bringing what little we could carry, leaving almost everything we knew and loved behind, we left. For nowhere. Into the darkness. Into the blackness where there hid a large gray monster lurking, waiting to swallow us whole. Glancing back, I saw the spider flag flapping in the wind outside our door.

Do widzenia.
Everybody knows the Grimm Brothers, right? Well, who knows the Grimm Brothers' Brother? No one. Don’t worry, I know. Wilhelm and Jacob get all the credit, but, really, I wrote half of those stories! They just re-wrote them! “To make them more appropriate for our readers!” they tell me.

Take this, for example: ever heard of Beauty and the Beast? Oh, of course you have. Beauty, Beast, yada yada yada. Well, that’s my tale, not the Grimms’! They wouldn’t let me join them. They told me, “Jackery,” (That’s my name. If you don’t know, that’s also the product of when your parents can’t decide between Zachary and Jack.) “you’re just too weird! Not to mention creepy…” My brothers were very straightforward.

Back to the whole Beast thing. That’s my tale! And this is how it really goes. “Beauty and the Beast” is really called “Hide and Seek the Beast.”

Once upon no time, a peasant boy lived in a tattered hut. No one knew who he was. He only existed to himself. He lived alone and was usually rather lonely. It was a rather sad life for him.

One day, what most people would call a hag, came to his door. He invited her inside and gave her warm food. (He was a rather kind boy.) After she finished eating, the boy went to get blankets and pillows. For some reason, the hag was seething when he came back. Apparently she had spotted a tray of cookies. He had not offered her one!

(Now, the boy would have. The hag was just a quite, how do I put this nicely, quite an academically challenged hag. Oh, who am I kidding! She was as stupid as they come! If she wasn’t so stupid, she would’ve noticed it was a tray full of cookie dough about to go in the oven. He was going to offer them to her in the morning. Duh!)

He tried to explain, but she would not listen. (Her hearing wasn’t so hot, either.) She grabbed a cookie, then spit it out, claiming they were terrible. But now she was no longer a super ugly hag, but a super-duper, rotten, gross, nauseating, disgusting, putrid, ugly hag! The hag (for short) was so furious that she cast a curse on the boy. He was turned into a beast because apparently, she was a wizard. Now for the real punishment! (This is where it’s supposed to get really good, but doesn’t.) She banished him to a fine castle with talking objects as his servants.

Now, because everybody has one, the wizard-hag had a favorite game: hide-and-seek. So in the fine castle, the wizard-hag told the boy, “If you do not play a game of hide-and-seek with someone passing by, by 12:00 on Friday, you will be turned back into a boy and be stuck here forever. Along with the endless clothes, food, friends, shelter, heat, servants, maids, butlers, money, and much, much, more!” she threatened. (Or at least tried to!) Also, that day was Tuesday. He would turn back into a boy stuck in this castle with friends, clothes, heat, food, and much more forever. (The witch was not very smart!) So, the boy asked many people, but they all said, “Leave me alone, you creep!”

He didn’t have any luck until Friday. It was 10:00 in the morning, and he saw a man taking a walk. He seemed rather lost. The beast went to approach him. “Hello, are you lost?” the beast asked as politely as he could with his raspy, boorish voice.

“Why, yes, I am! Could you help me, Mr. …?”
He replied in a loud tone. “Beast!” he answered, rather shocked by his loudness. The Beast’s voice was a good three octaves lower.

“Well, Mr. Beast, my name’s Maurice.”
“Ha, that rhymed!” he chuckled heartily.

Maurice was from the neighboring village to where the Beast used to live. He had one daughter, Bella. Bella was trained in self-defense. Kung Fu, Karate, and much more. (She could high kick like nobody’s business!)

In town there was this tough guy, Gaston. He wanted to get to know her because he was lonely. But Bella avoided him at all costs.

Maurice was an inventor. He had gone off to an inventor’s fair and was supposed to come back yesterday. So Bella went out to look for him. She got to the castle and decided to check it out. She got inside by picking a lock. (She was also trained in lock picking. You can never be too careful.) She found her father in a jail cell.

“Father!” she exclaimed.
“Shh! He’ll find me! Hide-and-seek is intense these days!”
But the Beast had heard. He came down and found Maurice. “ROAR! HOW DARE YOU FIND HIM BEFORE ME! Oh, a newcomer. You can hide anywhere but the west wing.” The Beast pranced off.

But Bella was curious. [Curiosity, class!] and to the west wing she went. The Beast found her and sent both her and her father away. The Beast lived in the castle happily never after.

The never-ending end!

(They also said I had a “bad ending!” Can you believe that?)
Summer days were sweet, and Kay and Letta enjoyed them to the fullest. The fields were thick with buttercups and new wheat, the verdant meadows’ long, lush grass hiding multitudes of wild strawberries. When the sun’s rays grew strong, and the after-noon air hot and oppressive, they would meander to the creek to splash and sail bark boats or doze lazily in the hammock under the shade of the porch.

One clear, hot day in July, Letta and Kay were playing King Arthur in their front yard. “Kneel, Sir Kay,” Letta said in her deepest voice. Letta was nearly always King Arthur, or else Guinevere, because Sir Kay was really a knight in the legends, so it only made sense for Kay to be the knight. “My lord,” Kay replied, laying his stick sword across his knees and bowing his head. At this point, they were interrupted by the front door creaking open, then closing again with a bang. They both looked up.

“Kay! Lettie!” their father called. Kay sprang to his feet and ran off, Letta following.

When they reached the front porch, their father was smiling broadly. “Today we’re going to the lake!” he announced. The siblings broke into wide grins. It was not often that they went somewhere, and such an excursion was always a treat. “I hear your mother is making a spice cake,” he added, licking his lips. “And, well, the bowl does seem rather messy.” Letta’s and Kay’s bright blue eyes lit up; they followed their father inside, dashing into the kitchen.

Their mother smiled as they burst inside. “Thirsty?” she asked. “I made some lemonade.” Then, seeing their gazes, she said, “I saved two spoons for a certain Kay and Letta. Wold you happen to know where they might be?”

“He!” Kay and Letta cried. Then they sat down and took up the wooden spoons.

After the spoons had been thoroughly and meticulously licked clean, Letta and Kay helped to pack the afternoon’s picnic basket and then ran upstairs for their swimsuits. Letta rumbled through the closet she shared with Kay, then her dresser. “Kay!” she called.

“In here!” he called back. At first glance, the hallway seemed empty. Then she spied Kay’s sandaled foot peeking out from behind the hall closet door. “Found them!” Kay exclaimed, pulling out first his blue swimsuit, then Letta’s light green one. They dressed quickly, putting light summer clothes on over the swimwear, and after Kay had located his compass and Letta her pinwheel and dressing, they went downstairs.

Running down the stairs, they nearly collided with their father, whose arms were full of a jumble of things, including folding chairs, tin buckets, a sailboat, and a large, colorful kite. “Hello! You’re in a hurry!” he exclaimed, juggling his load. They chortled, and each took a bucket. Then, catching dropped miscellanea, they followed their father inside, dashing into the kitchen.

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Their car was rather an old-fashioned thing, but a merry, yellow-and-metal thing, and held their family and cargo well. After several re-packings and much laughter, the trunk closed at last, and several re-packings and much laughter, the trunk closed at last, and after several re-packings and much laughter, the trunk closed at last, and they drove off.

In no time, they arrived at the lake. It was not a remarkably large one, and most of its edge was shingle or large rocks, but there was a particular white sand cove which was a favorite spot. The car pulled up to park in a patch of dirt not far from the lake’s shore, and Kay and Letta tumbled out. Ducking around their father and calling over their shoulders to their mother, they grabbed two buckets and the sailboat from the trunk and vanished around the curve.

First, they made a sand castle and knocked it down.

Next, they tramped around the shoreline with sandy feet and legs in search of a shallow in which to sail their boat, finally finding one overhung by a large, flat rock for a foot or so. Lying on their stomachs, they stretched out across the stone, steering with long branches their boat as well as others constructed of bark with leaf sails and twig masts. In such an indolent manner, though they occasionally became rather excited, they passed an hour or so, until a summon of “Lettie! Kay! Lunch!” echoed across the water. “Coming!” the children shouted in reply. Fishing out their fleet and scrambling to their feet, they then ran across the beach.

When Letta and Kay arrived, the picnic basket had been unpacked in the sandy cove, and the spice cake, now coated with a rich brown, caramel-walnut icing, fresh apples, a variety of sandwiches, pickles, carrots, and radishes from the garden, and a pitcher of lemonade reposed in an inviting array on the red-checked blanket. Everyone was hungry, and the food was devoured with great relish.

After lunch, Kay and Letta stretched out between their parents, watching white cotton candy clouds drift across the sky. Their bellies were full and minds idle as they giggled over pictures in the clouds. Therefore, they did not notice as their father sat up slowly and snuck something out of the picnic basket.

Then, chuckling gleefully inside, he revealed his surprise with a large, boyish grin, ejaculating, “What have we here? A kite, I do believe!” Letta and Kay immediately forgot the clouds, jumping and bouncing around their parents, as they made a large to-do about setting it up. A strong breeze had begun to blow, and the bright, multicolored kite sailed jollily against the blue.

There was much merry fun enjoyed. The kite swooped and rose, dancing on the wind. However, Kay and Letta soon grew hot and tired chasing it about, crisscrossing the beach; for the afternoon was warm, even by the lake. The wind, too, seemed to have grown weary and had lessened to a gentle zephyr. Their mother seemed to understand, and she then appeared in swim clothing, announcing a diving contest. Taking off their outer clothes and shoes, Kay and Letta dove into the lake, Kay following Letta with a cannonball and yell. They cooled off quickly, Kay’s tow-colored strands and Letta’s blonde pigtails soaked. Unconscious of their surrounding, brother and sister laughed and shrieked and splashed each other.

At length, it occurred to them that while their mother was at the shore, stepping into the cool water which frothed from Letta and Kay’s activity, their father was entirely missing. A shout from above ended their confusion, and they saw their father waving his arms from a boulder slightly shadowing the water’s edge. To their happy shock, he cried loudly, “Geronimo!” and leaped off the rock in a ginormous cannonball, the wake of which plowed into the two children and sent them reeling backwards in the waves. Soon the whole family was in the water. The time passed quickly, and before long, the sun had begun to cast an orange hue over the land and sky. Letta and Kay’s parents toweled them off, and then the children put on their cast-aside shirt, shorts, and dress. Once again the outing articles were stuffed into the trunk, and finally the family climbed in and drove away, back home.

That night, as Kay and Letta lay tucked in bed, Kay whispered sleepily to Letta, “Today was fun.”

“Yes,” Letta agreed, “lots. I hope we return someday.”

“True, but I beat you in the swimming race,” Kay answered, yet more sleepily. Letta laughed and began to say something. But Kay was already asleep.
Creative Writing ~ Ages 13 – 15

POETRY

First Place
Daniel Blokh – Age 14
Birmingham, Alabama, U.S.A.
“Dinner”

Jenny Li – Age 14
Los Angeles, California, U.S.A.
“Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Campesino Child”

Second Place
Caili Murphy – Age 13
Prairie View, Illinois, U.S.A.
“Small”

Raymond Mathez – Age 13
Ingleside, Illinois, U.S.A.
“Red”

Third Place
Haemaru Chung – Age 14
New York, New York, U.S.A.
“Ode to Violin”

STORIES

First Place
Audrey Wan Earn Jia – Age 13
Singapore
“Final Enemy”

Second Place
Joonho Jo – Age 15
Exeter, New Hampshire, U.S.A.
“Sliced Peaches”

Megan Shu’En – Age 13
Singapore
“Superhero”

Rachel ZiRui – Age 14
Singapore
“Reflection”

Sangeetha Bharath – Age 14
Mountain House, California, U.S.A.
“Connect the Dots”

Third Place
Emma Kim – Age 14
Shanghai, China
“Learning to See: Living to Be”
Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Campesino Child
by Jenny Li
Age 14
Los Angeles, California, U.S.A.
First Place Tie

I
Among twenty sleeping campesinos,
The only thing moving
Was the pencil of a girl.

II
She was of three truths
Like a notebook
In which there are three rings.

III
The girl grew in a wooden shack.
It was a small part of the earth.

IV
A row of crates and a migrant farmer
Are one.
A dream, an education, and a campesino child
Are one.

V
She does not know which to prefer,
The beauty of her father’s strong shoulders
Or the beauty of Huckleberry Finn,
The whistle ending the work day
Or just after.

VI
The girl filled the small table
With her notebooks.
Her mother’s bent back
Arched in the negative space of bushels.
The shadow of her mother loomed over the stove
Like blackbirds circling the field.

VII
O thin walls of the school,
Why do you imagine flaxen-haired boys?
Do you not see how the girl
Writes with the hand
Of the scholars about you?

VIII
She knows Shakespeare’s sonnets
And the beautiful Pythagorean Theorem;
But she knows, too,
That the camp
Has taught her what she knows.

IX
When her learning expands beyond the perimeters of the farm,
The girl marks the end
Of one of many cycles.

X
At the sight of the calloused hands
Tending to the brown earth,
Even the hardened campesino
Would cry out sharply.

XI
She walked across the tilled soil
In a wide-brimmed hat.
Once, a fear pierced her,
In that she mistook
The shadow of her ancestors
For her own fate.

XII
The migrant worker is moving.
The harvest must be ready for picking.

XIII
It was picking season all summer long.
The girl was growing
And she will continue to grow.
The open notebook sat
In-between rows of corn.
In my mind, 
my mother is a warrior, brawling 
on the kitchen’s battlefield. 
She stands in ambush of the 
unsuspecting ingredients, a locked and loaded 
pepper grinder in her hand. Fearless, she eats the hearts of 
choking artichokes, butchers beets and 
breaks the barbed breastplates of the defiant pineapples. 
Pots and pans applaud 
as she shaves away the scallions’ beards. 
None dare face her. At night, the survivors whisper tales 
of red warnings painted across the floor, of strawberries 
buried beneath batter, of a huntress’s ferocious eyes 
that never shed tears, even for the onions. I watch in wonder 
as she stands behind the door, her smile lit with calm, 
ready to grab victory in her beet-bloodied palm.
In the daybreak,
There's a seed.
Through the cold,
wicked nights,
There's a warrior.
Holding against all odds,
It blossoms.
Returning to the earth,
A dainty little flower.

Red feels like a freshly woven silk tunic, soft and warm as it moves through one's hand.

It smells like a rose after it blooms from a bud, releasing its wonderful aroma.

It tastes like a ripe cherry, squirting a sweet juice throughout one's mouth.

It sounds like a crackling, wood fire in a fireplace made of hard brick.

Red looks like a glistening ruby in a cave deep beneath the surface of the Earth.
Ode to Violin
by Haemaru Chung
Age 14
New York, New York, U.S.A.
Third Place

Four strings lined up
Like a trained platoon
Each a different voice
And each a different tune

G string is low
D string is moderate
A string mellow
And E string high

Like a crescent moon
Its edges curve gracefully
Like a snail shell
Its scroll rolls playfully

Its faces shown aplenty
As strings and bow mingle
Deep as the rolling sea
Swift as an arrow

I hear from you
A musical reflection of me
Violin, prickly and coy
Best friends we'll always be
There are many elements that make up a game. There is the setting, of course. The premise, designed to ensnare players. The options that collapse into a logical order invisible to the one who sets them in motion. The fluid shift of graphics and the banners of text that keep the story from crumbling into separate parts of a whole. Finally, there are the characters.

I open the door, not because I have chosen to, but because it is the only thing my mind knows. My joints lock together, feet bracing themselves against the ground, and for a moment it feels so natural that I have to remind myself what I am built upon. What my world is in reality, once it is whittled down to its barest bones.

I am the protagonist of this game, and my entire existence runs on a code. The game is built to revolve around me. If I am the pearl, the rest of the universe has simply been constructed for the sole purpose of becoming my clam. Every part of me is deliberately composed, from the folds of the uniform that flutter against my thigh to the light rise and fall of my chest when I stand still, and I like it because it means that every part of me was meant to be created. My purpose is a grand one, flickering across thousands of screens to reach a thousand pairs of eyes, and it doesn’t matter, it doesn’t matter. The only person I need to move forward. It doesn’t matter if I don’t know my enemy, because the sound of my own voice is my favorite thing to hear.

I run from the flickering shards and realize that it is the part of the game that has come unraveled. I reach deep down into the air, ready to strike, and then a small thought worms its way into my mind like a parasite. I don’t even know my enemy. I know many things; that I must destroy all of them, that it is the only thing my mind knows. My joints lock together, feet bracing themselves against the ground, and for a moment it feels so natural that I have to remind myself what I am built upon. What my world is in reality, once it is whittled down to its barest bones.

I am the protagonist of this game, and my entire existence runs on a code. The game is built to revolve around me. If I am the pearl, the rest of the universe has simply been constructed for the sole purpose of becoming my clam. Every part of me is deliberately composed, from the folds of the uniform that flutter against my thigh to the light rise and fall of my chest when I stand still, and I like it because it means that every part of me was meant to be created. My purpose is a grand one, flickering across thousands of screens to reach a thousand pairs of eyes, and although there are many paths for me to follow, there will always be one that leads to success.

I duck into a hallway, fingers moist against the sheath of the sword that I am gripping. The first thing I notice about the walls is that they are white – a white that isn’t so much pure as it is bleeding, like starr stit at it for too long could drain the darkness from behind my eyelids. I don’t like this place, my own voice twangs from inside my ribcage, but already I can feel my limbs moving, darting, controlled by one who presses the buttons.

The green button – run. My feet hit the ground, pumping, soft muffled thumps against the white floor as if a body has fallen limply to the ground. I would like to close my eyes and compose myself, but I cannot.

The red button – attack. The enemy is in sight, glowing crimson around its edges, and I am suddenly overtaken by the urge to annihilate. My hands bring the sword high up into the air, ready to strike, and then a small thought worms its way into my mind like a parasite. I don’t even know my enemy. I know many things; that I must destroy all of them, that they threaten the safely of this world, that I am meant to lead everyone to salvation, but I have never once tried to talk to the others the game for the players, but I have never been a person on my own. Every part of me was created for the sake of the game.

My legs are a blur against the ground as I travel from the white corridor to a staircase that winds and folds upon itself. My next objective is to destroy the boss of this level, as I have for the past forty-two, but I have something dangerous taking seed in the depths of my mind. This time, I’m not going to destroy what the game dictates for me. I’m going to destroy the true enemy, the barriers of the game itself. Code is a complicated thing, rows upon rows of numbers and letters that can construct entire worlds, but it is also fragile. If I can rearrange just one of the whispers of thread, the entire rope will fray apart with the force of a shout. I don’t know what will happen to me, but at least I’ll be the protagonist of my own life.

The door swings open, and in the corner of my eye I see something gleam. There it is. What looks like the end of a fluttering piece of cloth, jammed in between the hinges. A part of the game that has come unraveled. I reach deep down inside myself and shift, bringing my hands up in the pretence of grabbing an item, and in the last second clench my fists around the cloth and pull. The world shatters into fragments around me.

I run from the flickering shards and realize that it is the first movement I have ever made on my own. I laugh, and my voice is beautiful.

“Ugh, this game is glitching!”
Hold that thought; I’ll finish the essay after Skyping Mom. until then, I have to take in every single moment—even moments like right now. I understand that there will be a time when I won’t be able to even Skype or call or email Mom. So this year, I set a goal. I can’t do anything to alter the past. What I can change is the present and lose this part of my life that I did not appreciate enough.

So much homework and so little free time in my entire life, especially away from home. So I did what every student did. I complained. “Mom, can you even comprehend the amount of work I have to do tonight?” I would tell her about the elementary school drama that took place, including what Janey yelled at the teacher today and about how Bobby asked out Jessica in the school playground, and how Jessica said, “ew,” in her usual, nasally voice. I would tell her that I needed to get better at basketball because the “cool kids” were good at it and I wanted to be “cool.” I would tell her about snack break and gym time, and how both were cut short because of a stupid fire drill that made me shiver in the playground. Through all that, she would nod along, smiling at every complaint, and hand me my favorite fruit, sliced peaches.

In middle school, math class became an ideal napping place: the dim lights, the cool contact between the smooth surface of the desk and my tired head, the snoring of the student behind me. Science was impossible to grasp, and I blamed that on the fact that our science teacher, a botany major, was teaching us astronomy. Even gym class became a hassle, as the teachers tried to make it more “fitness-focused.”

As for the school drama, my peers and I became more offensive and our mouths morphed from innocent elementary ones, into evil middle school ones. The words such as “faggot” and “dumbass” were yelled in the halls and every conversation involved a classmate’s heavy weight, or un-athletic nature, or awful dress; and the worst part was that I was in the middle of it. Because I was on the basketball team, I was in the “in” crowd (that’s just how middle school politics worked), and that meant bullying would be ever-present wherever I went. In these situations, I was both the bullied and the bully; I remember being called a “douchebag” while naming others “obese” and “ugly.”

I recall that Mom helped me deal with all of these new middle school issues. She always greeted me from school with a present, whether it was the classic Soondooboo Jigue, my favorite Korean meal, or Kobe Bryant’s NBA jersey collectible card, despite my frown and my adolescent, boorish attitude. She asked how my school day was, and I never replied. “I’m too tired to talk.” I said as I brushed past her shoulder up the stairs and locked my room door. But even with the support of my mom, the dropping grades and the increase of drama at school caused stress, and stress – well, I was starting to shave the surface of what it actually was.

Take the hardest possible rock from the 1902 square miles of the Grand Canyon and combine that with Arnold Schwarzenegger’s top right abdominals, and your result will still be smaller than the level of academic difficulty at Phillips Exeter Academy. Then take the zenith of Mount Everest and add that to the height of Michael Jordan’s best vertical jump and you will get my stress level freshman year. I had never experienced so much homework and so little free time in my entire life, especially away from home. So I did what every student did. I complained. “Mom, can you even comprehend the amount of work I have to do tonight?” I would tell her on Skype, “Mom, this is the most stressed I’ve ever been in my entire life.” “Mom, I have zero free time, do you hear me? Z-e-r-o-o.” And then, as my mom tried comforting me with the new present she had bought for me, a checkered blue and green Patagonia sweater, I would push down the “end call” button and rush out of my room shutting the dorm room door.

In ninth grade, I left my mom to go to Exeter, and she now lives in Korea. When I came to Exeter, I reminisced on how little homework I had in second and eighth grade. I reminisced on how I could go on the playground and run around not having to worry about the “electrostatics and magnetics” physics test coming during E format, or that Roman history paper due the next day that I had not even checked out the books for. I reminisced on the twenty minute homework assignments and not having to analyze and memorize thirty dense lines of Shakespeare’s Hamlet while solving derivative problems. But as I adjusted to Exeter life and its difficulties and joys, I realized that this was not what I missed the most. I missed the embrace of my mom more. Much more.

The modern era allows us to communicate long distance: phones, Skype, email, and Facebook. But it’s not the same. Not nearly the same. I can’t give my mom a hug through the phone, or a kiss through Facebook. Mom can’t make me my favorite dish through Skype, or email me her presence. Yes, school became more difficult, and yes, there was more to worry about as I grew older, but at the same time, I was beginning to lose this part of my life that I did not appreciate enough.

So this year, I set a goal. I can’t do anything to alter the past. What I can change is the present and future. I understand that there will be a time when I won’t be able to even Skype or call or email Mom. So until then, I have to take in every single moment—even moments like right now.

Hold that thought; I’ll finish the essay after Skyping Mom.

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Sliced Peaches
by Joonho Jo
Age 15
Exeter, New Hampshire, U.S.A.
Second Place Tie

(Dedicated to my parents, who helped me grow to be the person that I am today, and who will further help me prosper into the man I will be.)
It is funny how scenes can change so quickly, so drastically. One day, I was a grinning seven-year-old blowing out the flickering candles on the cake, with my parents singing the birthday song, telling me they loved me.

The next day, my father walked out on us. I remembered myself. The stoic little boy standing at the door, eyes fixated on his father’s retreating figure, clutching the little Superman action figure in his hand. A flicker of hope inside me, hoping that if he turned back, the sight of the birthday present he had given to me would somehow cause a change of heart; a flicker of hope, soon extinguished.

My mother was sobbing. Loudly. However, it soon faded to a dull drone in my ears. Instead, my father’s words as he handed me the gift took center stage in my mind. “I’m giving you this, because I want you to know that I will always be there for you. I’ll always be your Superman.”

He had lied.
He was never going to be there for me.
He was never going to be my hero, my Superman.
Seven-year-old me was naive, but I knew that much.

It seemed preposterous that my father would even be capable of such a thing – there had been no warning signs, no flashing alerts. He simply did not seem like the type of person who could do such a thing.

He was a gentle and soft-spoken person. Despite suggestions for a change, he always stuck to the same, tidy hairstyle. “Have to keep my ‘bush’ trimmed,” he would joke, with that perpetual twinkle in his eye. Simple clothes, usually dark-colored pants and a plain shirt, were what he normally opted to wear.

But most of all, he had a broad, warm smile. It was a comforting smile; one that made you feel safe and reassured. It was only at that moment that I realized that I could not judge a book by its cover. His warm smile, the smile I had so often sought refuge in, was dangerous. It gave false reassurance. It hid lies.

I felt no hurt, no misery. Only fiery, scorching anger. As soon as he disappeared, I bolted into my room. In a fit of heated emotions, I flung the action figure into my drawer, among the piles of rubbish, and kicked the drawer shut. For years, it remained unmoved, untouched, unseen.

It stayed there, and all was fine, until her returned.

I was fifteen, and had outgrown action figures and birthday parties. Still, Mother had prepared a feast, which I certainly had no qualms about. What I did have qualms about, however, was the man sitting at the table.

“Who is this man?” I wondered, before Mother cheerfully declared, “He’s your father!”

“My father?”

In eight years, he had changed, so much so that I barely recognized him. Graying hair hung over his eyes and stuck out in odd places on his head. Staring into his weary, “dead” eyes was tantamount to staring into a hollow pit of despair. A few wrinkles creased his face. His faded garments had patches in several areas.

“Yes, your father!” That exuberant smile was still plastered on her face.

“No.”
Her grin faded. “No?” “A father doesn’t disappear, only materializing after eight years. A father stays with his family through thick and thin. He had an affair while married to you! As far as I’m concerned, the day he left was the day he relinquished his title as a father. I will not fall for his chicanery again. He’s not my father.” I could hear my volume and pace increasing as I spoke.

Roaring flames burned, danced, blazed inside me, identical to those that had consumed my seven-year-old self.

Next to me, I heard my father inhale deeply; then exhale.

“Do you…remember the promise I made on your seventh birthday?”

“Yes,” I replied monotonously. Though I wish I did not. “You told me you were always going to be there for me. You said you were going to be my hero. Nothing but lies.” I could hear my voice catching in my throat at the end - a crack in my carefully constructed façade. My father nodded, then reached into his bag.

I watched, unable to peel my gaze away, as one by one, he set seven superhero action figures on the table in front of me.

One for every birthday he had missed.

“I wasn’t really sure why I bought one every year,” my father began in subdued tones, wary that one word could send me flying into a rage. “At first, I thought it was to remind myself of my failure to fulfill the promise to my son, my failure to be my son’s hero.”

“I’m not your son,” I thought immediately, and to my immense surprise, rather half-heartedly. The words were at the tip of my tongue, begging to be said, but something compelled me to suppress that urge.

“But I realized… there was something I was desperately trying to fill. A self-centered void in my life.”

“But why?” The question sprang from my lips before I could think twice. I was startled at the tone of my voice, which seemed hurt, weak, vulnerable. Emotions I had locked away for years. “Why did you do it, then? Why did you have that affair? Why… didn’t you stay?”

“I thought that if I stayed, I would hurt you more. The pathetic excuse of a father who couldn’t be a hero, but was a weak coward.”

He suddenly reached into his bag again and pulled out another action figure.

It was Superman again, in all his glory. However, this time he was not alone. Next to him stood a little boy, also in the trademark red and blue suit.

“Happy birthday, son.”

I eyed the figurine in wonder. The beaming faces of Superman and Superman Junior. It was as if they were communicating to me the words my father could not say. I am sorry. I could not be your hero, and I will never be, but I hope you will be able to accept me again.

“If… if you want me to go away, I will. Just… please accept them,” my father said. Though her sounded certain, I could hear the slight tremor in his voice. He was anxious. He was afraid.

I took a deep breath, then turned and strode away to my room. Out of the corner of my eye, I could see my father’s crestfallen expression. He thought I had given up. The drawer, unopened for eight years, was thrown open.
The figure, untouched, unopened for eight years, was taken up.

Clutching the figure in my hand, I slowly made my way back to the living room, feeling like I had been transported back in time, and was once again the silent seven-year-old standing at the door.

This time, my father was looking at me. This time, he did not turn away. The downcast expression on his face transformed as he caught sight of the figure in my hand. The corners of his mouth lifted, and the twinkle in his eye that I had missed for so long returned.

“I… I forgive you,” I murmured.
His face broke into that warm, familiar smile. Seeing that, if finally dawned on me.

My father, my superhero was back.

Things would never be the same.

Still, this was the start of building anew.
“You’re not going to get anywhere staring at my grave, you know.”

The owner of the voice is a pale figure, standing before him in a shifting, shapeless dress that falls to her knees. It’s perhaps the first thing he notices about her, hanging about her like a murky cloud. The second is the fact that she seems to be made of mist. He’s sure that if he even so much as touched her, his fingers would slip right through.

She’s staring at him, a ghostly smile playing around her lips. He knows what she is. He remembers her all too well. Somehow, he’s not really surprised. He always knew the ghost of his past would come back to haunt him.

“So you’re back,” he breathes.

She steps out from behind the headstone to meet him.

Aidan and Nadia.

I don’t know why any parent—or anybody in the right state of mind, for that matter—would ever think it would be “unique” or “cool” to give their twins palindromic names. No, it’s not “cool”…As if I didn’t have to share the same womb, birthday, and last name of my sister, now I have to share the exact letters of our first name with her.

My parents must not have been in the right state of mind when they decided to have us, since they filed for divorce a year and a half after we popped out of the womb.

It’s not so easy juggling two households in between school and growing up—in fact, it was a total nightmare. Sometimes I wonder if it would have been easier if our parents just took a twin each and migrated to opposite ends of the globe—like in “The Parent Trap.” I hated switching between two households every weekend. My mum’s household was a total mess. She’d been remarried nearly four times before we even reached sixteen. My dad’s household was the complete opposite. There was literally no one else around whenever we went over during the weekend—even he was at work, too busy to even spend time with us. I don’t know why he even agreed to a split child custody.

Basically the only thing that remained constant in my life was Nadia, and I in hers. Sometimes I wish my parents could have been just like the ones in that movie. Then the thing wouldn’t have happened. Nadia could have been so much more than I was. If you could bring back the dead, what would you do?

That’s the question that’s been playing on a loop in his mind for five months straight. And now that it’s actually happened, he doesn’t have any idea what he’s going to tell her.

The first thing that tumbles out of his mouth is “I’m sorry.”

She shakes her head.

“You don’t have to apologize for what you did. There was absolutely nothing you could have done to stop it.”

“I could have stopped the car. I could have jumped in front of you, could have thrown my body to protect you—”

She shakes her head again, sadly.

Nadia has always wanted to help people. When she was younger, we’d watch the medical dramas playing on the television together. I think she got her aspirations from all those actors in their blue scrubs, their performance only meant for the screen. Nothing you see on television is real. Not even those rags-to-riches stories. I’ve learned this the hard way.

She just told me she wanted to go to a medical school.

And honestly—with our situation? She couldn’t. Deadbeat parents—hardly a middle-class household. We had this conversation many times, and each time it turned into an argument, each uglier than the last.

This argument was the ugliest.

She’d run across the road before I could even stop her.

The next part is always the clearest in my mind. Not that I want it to be, of course. I’d try to shut my eyes and turn it off. But the tragic movie in my mind keeps on playing.

Sports car, red. Careening towards the figure on the road at an
unstoppable rate. An impact. A scream. Mine, before I realize it. Blood. Blood everywhere, on the tarmac, against the gleaming hood of the car, on my hands as I grip her lifeless body. Red on her face, dripping down her eyelashes. Deafening red of the sirens, flashing across my face in quick, sharp bursts. Red as I call out her name, uselessly, again and again, each broken sob echoing against the hollow space in my ribs.

It feels like there’s an empty space where something has inexplicably been wrenched out from within.

“Look at me. I’m gone now.”

He looks up.

She spreads her hands out, and he sees her—this trick, whatever it is—for who she really is. There’s not a trace of the original being. He sees right through her—she is nothing more but a sliver of the being she once was. She was never her; she was perhaps a mere memory of the real person. The Nadia that once existed is gone.

“I’m gone—and you know this,” she says. “Death comes for us all. You need to let go of me.” He can feel wet-hot salt pouring down his cheeks.

“But remember this—I’m not fully gone yet. We were part of a single being once, and my soul is welded to yours after everything we’ve been through. A part of me lives on in you. Carry it. Wear it on your sleeve. We will never be fully apart.”

Perhaps he just needed someone to tell him those words all along.

What do I even hope to lose? It was like there was some irreplaceable part of a soul, fused together with mine, and then torn apart. I felt my heart crack in two as we laid her into the ground to rest. Porcelain lips against her porcelain skin.

She breaks away from him, a soft smile etched into her face. She’s nothing more than a spectral, a phantom reminder of a distant companion.

“Walk away from me,” she commands.

He turns away obligingly. He takes a step forward, filled with a renewed strength. When he looks back, she’s gone.

I take her with me, carrying her—the distant memory of a companion—slung across my back, a part of her embedded within me. We were a single being once.

Aidan and Nadia. Nadia and Aidan.
My mother was once strong, but life was so sure and terrible as to replace her health with malady.  

“You won’t forget me, right, Gemma?” My mother’s tired finger brushed a tear off my cheek before it fell to its death on the hospital bed beneath me.  

“How could you ask such a question?” I spoke and offered my best attempt at a smile. She turned her head, ever so slightly, to look at the window. In this moment, everything around me became palpable; colors felt tangible. I looked at my mother’s eyes, the sparkling cerulean color of which had not faded through her sickness.  

I locked my gaze upon my mother; I couldn’t afford to lose a second. The sound of a ringing phone shoved its way into the thick air. The dreadful noise permeated through the room and drove me back to reality. A nurse picked up the call with, “Hello, this is North Shore Hospital, Auckland, New Zealand. How may we help you?” I continued to absentmindedly listen to the nurse chat with the person on the other end while simultaneously focus on my mother.  

My mother, in a soft, tired voice, said, “I need you to do something for me, before I, uh,” she let silence speak the words she couldn’t say.  

“Yes,” I whispered. “Anything.”  

She smiled wearily, but I saw a glint of mischief in her eyes.  

“When my parents and I fled to New Zealand, some fifty years ago, I was seven years old. It was during ‘Nam.” She looked at me expectantly.  

“I know that, Mom.”  

“Well, before our first night in the new house, my father took me out to see the new country.”  

“Grandpa? That’s nice,” I spoke to her soothingly, with calm words and a benign tone.  

“I need you to go to the places we visited. I have a list of them in my wallet.”  

“Now? Mom, are you sure? I think it’s better if I stay with you.”  

“How could you ask such a question?” I spoke and offered the same smile.  

She spoke sternly, but her lips curled into a smile.  

She replied, “Your mother wanted me to tell you that she asked you to see that everything starts from something, and that change can be good.”  

My mother was once strong, but life was so sure and terrible as to give her hope for the future.  

I didn’t make it to all the places on the list, but I understood the message.

I picked up a call from the hospital.

The nurse came to me and gave me the news I already knew, after driving from Auckland to Hamilton, I requested directions to the registrar. The clerk studied me over the rim of her glasses.  

She asked, “Can I help you?”  

I spoke indecisively, “Ella and George sent me.”  

The lady was puzzled, “I’m sorry, what?”  

I was nonplussed.  

She typed quickly, clawing the keyboard with her scarlet nails. “Oh!” She looked at me, then back to her screen. “Did you know Waikato University had just started when Ella and George came by for the first time?” The lady didn’t wait for my response as she printed something. She snatched up the sheet from the printer sitting next to her. She folded it multiple times and handed it to me.  

I thanked her and left while undoing the creases. It was a photograph of the original Waikato University, after its opening in 1965. I turned around and looked at the current Waikato standing in front of me. The difference was astonishing. Amid poring over the picture, a glint of sunlight on my watch reminded me to continue to the next destination.  

The second item on the list was vague, written as Haast Pass. I took a ferry to the south island of New Zealand. I swiftly called a friend to borrow her car, and within an hour, I was headed on New Zealand’s State Highway 6.  

The Haast Pass crosses over the Southern Alps and is located some two thousand feet above sea level. I had no idea why my grandfather would take his young daughter on the pass, considering the final link was only added in 1966, when they arrived in New Zealand.  

Nevertheless, I searched for two hours before I found an old chest-like box, by luck or by fate, with the name George Durr, my grandfather’s name, engraved on its face.  

The lid flipped open effortlessly and lying on the velveteen base was a small rock and a note that read, “a piece of the rough track from Haast Pass.” The pass was converted to a road in 1966 after my grandfather and mother visited. The road’s change made me think about why I was here.  

My peaceful contemplation was disturbed again by a phone’s awful tone.  

It was the hospital.  

I arrived, breathless, to the hospital, I saw the nurse and the doctor conversing in hushed tones outside my mother’s room.  

The nurse came to me and gave me the news I already knew so well. A sob found its way into my throat as the nurse spoke, “Your mother wanted me to tell you that she asked you to leave because,” the nurse averted her gaze, as though exhausted from giving patient’s families bad news. Much to my surprise, her eyes met mine in a brief moment, “because,” she continued, “she wanted you to see the world in a new light before she died. She said she wanted you to see that everything starts from something, and that change can be good.”  

The air itself enveloped me with warm arms; gentle, wet kisses of humid air showered upon me as if to say, “It’s time to start fresh, to take a step forward and begin anew.” I didn’t make it to all the places on the list, but I understood the message.

I found myself thanking the nurse and walking away from my mother’s room. I began walking faster, sorrow and avidness flooding me simultaneously.

My mother was always strong, and life was so sure and brilliant as to give her hope for the future.
“Remember, Mark, sometimes difficulties can make you stronger,” the guidance counselor encouraged. Mark shrugged indifferently before rising from his seat walking out of Mrs. Kuykendall’s office. He kept his eyes on the floor as he trekked through the halls filled with messy, tearful hugs, and long farewell messages being written in yearbooks. All the while, Mark kept thinking about the counselor’s cookie-cutter attempt to cheer him up. Mark finally made it to the doors of Hell, through which he pranced with a sense of temporary freedom before humidity shackled him back to earth. Ahh, he thought, day one of summer break.

Despite arriving at home sweet home, Mark’s parents bombarded him with the same questions as the students at school.

“What are you planning to do this summer? How are your applications coming along?” To students, Mark responded with completely fabricated “plans,” just to cherish the shocked looks on their faces. But he couldn’t do the same now because these were his parents. Instead of elaborating on his plans to probe a deep ocean oil rig or excavate at the rumored site of Camelot, Mark shrugged and insisted that he had it all figured out before running upstairs.

Mark shut the door to his room and plopped down at his desk. He looked around blankly at his Ender’s Game poster, Darth Vader chair, and a personal collection of superhero bobble heads he’d been collecting since he was five. As he glanced at an awkwardly proportioned version of Cyclops, a post-it note attached to the top of his monitor caught his eye. Mark leaned forward from his seat and read the words, “To do: get started on college essays!”

The teenager heaved an exasperated sigh before resting his head against the cool surface of his desk.

The truth was, Mark had no idea what he was going to do during his junior summer, and what could he possibly write about for his personal essay. Others his age were writing about their out-of-this-world experiences, about what made them unique and exceptional. Mark thought long and hard about what made him different.

The fact that I’m colorblind? Mark thought, as he smirked at the idea that this disability made him “special.”

It’s more of a pain in the neck. He paused. But my being colorblind does affect my daily life. It doesn’t make me special… but it makes me different. Thoughts were constantly popping up in Mark’s brain; how being colorblind related to international politics, how he might argue his sight as a geometric proof. Mark’s mind rattled with so many quirky and fun notions that he decided to retreat to Tom Cat’s Café. That was where he decided to “ditch” prom in 2009 and to spend his allowance on a booster box of Magic; the Gathering playing cards – which did not even have the mythic rare card he so desperately wanted to reward him with the mythic rare card he so desperately hoped to draw.

The cat café was a five-minute walk from his family’s apartment. The café owner, Tom, was a heavy, middle-aged man with bright eyes and a permanent smile. Normally, this sort of person would drive Mark insane – what was there to be so happy about all the time? But Tom was an exception; he was simply, passively amused with life. Sometimes, Mark thought the chubby man was a cat himself, just watching feathers and bells drift around his café.

“Markie boy! Honeymilk’s been waiting for ya. She’s right around the back somewhere.”

Mark waved at Tom and looked around the room, spotting Honeymilk sleeping on the back booth. He sat down directly beside his favorite tabby and stroked her soft fur. A minute later, Tom brought him a cup of Mark’s special coffee – the grumpuccino.

“What’s botherin’ you today, eh? A lil’ birdie told me that t’day was y’er first day o’ summer!” Tom clapped his pancake-size hands with a whole-hearted smile.

“Tom, how do you think I should… uh… embrace my eyes?”

“Embrace? That’s a tough question, Markie. The answer is different for you and me, just like everyone else. For me, I always worried about my tub here,” he slapped his gut loudly, earning a disappointing glare from Honeymilk. “But today, looking back, I’ve never had any reason to hate my weakness. It is part of who I am. Just try to find a way to love yourself – flaws and all.” Tom turned to greet a young couple that just entered, joined by Honeymilk who padded behind him in pursuit of a cat treat.

Try. Does that really apply to me? What could I possibly try?

After Tom came back to the booth, Mark asked, “So you want me to explore?”

“Exactly! You live in New York. Look around you. There’s an urban eatery, shopping malls, and the Met –“

“I get it, I get it!” Mark smiled, anticipating what Tom would say next.

“Alright, boy. Then take your coffee and get out of this cat café! Honey and I will wait for ya here. Say hello to y’er parents for me, now!”

Mark gave Honeymilk an affectionate stroke as he left a scrunched up five-dollar bill on the table and headed out the door. He smirked as he heard Tom yell from the counter, “Next time, some more tip for the therapist, if you will!”

Mark sipped his grumpuccino and continued to stroll through the busy streets of New York. The world always felt it was shadowed by something – like he wore blinders that restricted what he was allowed to see. But walking through the quiet, lukewarm New York dusk, Mark felt rather than saw. He felt the softened asphalt of the roads as he crossed them, cooling as the merciful skyscrapers shielded the cracked, jet black rivers from the sky’s glaring eye. He smelled the dusty musk of a construction site, hearing rivets and hammers pierce the more neutral, distant car horns and subtle roar of engines, planes, and the occasional helicopter.

Opening his eyes, he saw the course inside of a concrete wall, cracked by some accident or vandal. He saw the jutting, vivid patterns of graffiti that clung to the brick and cement behemoths of the city like lichen to trees. Mark saw the world and knew it was not the same, and that was not such a bad thing. It was all just a matter of perspective.

The city sighed into its nighttime state around the boy as he returned home. He kept to the lights, which he knew were bright. He avoided the alleys, which he knew were dark. He returned to his house, which he knew was safe – to his parents who loved him. Mark sat down and wrote till the early hours of the morning, about everything that came to mind. He wrote about his dreams, his disappointments. His failures and the lessons he learned. Mark wrote about his eyes and the world he had seen, and never once did his writing sound defeated. Setbacks and shades of uncertainty were a part of life, just like Mark’s being colorblind.

Life can be a scary place if you worry only about being the same or being different. Maybe that is why Tom always smiles from the back booth, lounging in his café with Honeymilk and a grumpuccino. He doesn’t matter what you see, smell, taste, or hear. All that matters in the end is what you do.
POETRY

First Place

Wei Ting – Age 16
Singapore
“Find a Trustable Adult”

Second Place

Da-eun Lee – Age 16
Seoul, South Korea
“You, Mother Nature”

Emma Kantor – Age 16
Oakland, California, U.S.A.
“Life of a Penny”

By Lisa Zou – Age 16
Chandler, Arizona, U.S.A.
“Thoughts on a Violent Culture”

Third Place

Trevor Knepp – Age 16
Chicago, Illinois, U.S.A.
“Absolution”

STORIES

First Place

Olivia Dabich – Age 17
Dunn Loring, Virginia, U.S.A.
“A Defector and Family’s Guide to the
Aftermath of Defection from North Korea”

Second Place

Emma Kantor – Age 16
Oakland, California, U.S.A.
“Permit Test”

Ada Kang Li Lim – Age 16
Singapore
“Coffee with a Dash of Love”
To that trustable adult,  
that promised you were one;  
who led me to the  
seat, from the posters  
outside your door:

Your job is to catch  
the  
words when they leave  
my tongue. And hold  
it in your hand: the gloves  
being the contract on your job  
description, the promise that you would  
listen, because that’s what  
age authorizes you to do.

You are to ask me  
why. And listen. Because  
you have ears. And I shared  
with you something I  
would never give. I would  
like to think that I’m not  
just your job,  
but because that’s  
what people do. They  
understand.

You are to  
accommodate  
rambling, panicking.  
You are to  
ignore that I am  
struggling  
to keep tears from spilling,  
the red flush on my  
face, and  
that sheepish,  
disrespectful grin you did  
not like, hanging where  
I can’t  
see.

I’m just a child.  
No, I’m no longer one,  
not in your eyes.  
For I  
am dressed in years  
of dreams,  
of failed expectations,  
disappointment and  
insecurity, resignation,  
indifference, apathy  
and cynicism:  
I am dressed  
like an  
adult.

For that,  
You are no longer obliged.  
And you cover  
your ear  
with a sieve for the words,  
collected pieces,  
synthesized  
sentences you  
want to hear.  
For I am mute  
for all that you may care.
You were the sun, radiant,
goin’ round spreading your smile.
The one that perked up plants
and animated animals.

but slowly your sight blurred,
and you became Visionless.
You didn’t like the world through bifocals,
so you just went on, squinching.

Every time a crusty crease between your brows,
your eye rims wetted,
greens in front of you shredded,
Living in a kaleidoscope,
The colours and shapes
left for you to make out the planet
came to you like a dream,
an illusion, you said.

On the left your nails grew long,
So long they touched the floor – a cane of
grown nerves and minds,
Gouged, ripped and burnt by people
with elongated lips and tunneled eyes.

Your right ones were short;
you painted with the right,
and you didn’t use a brush
because you shook when you held it.

Fractured, you told me about
the beauty of fire and sky,
how you would have painted them,
If not for your offspring,
whom you defined as the miscarried
outcomes of your desire –
to win cold bread,
to spoon hot broth

You had once talked about cicadas,
herds and herds of brown variegated cicadas patching trunks
that end in shadows of leaves fresh and salty as the ocean,
sallow droplets of cicada larvae polka-dotted on ochre dirt,
how much you wanted to re-call them and paint them free.

By the time your offspring came of age
but not quite of the insight they could’ve,
Disjoined,
you talked about your birthplace,
the land you called holy
because it was inviolable and bare,
and great whales of energies rammed and thrusted,
bearing you.
I was born in the prettiest hell I ever saw,
I didn’t mind burning at all, you said.

But not in here,
I don’t want to die here,
not with the fire and the sky still inside me,
you said.
Life of a Penny
by Emma Kantor
Age 16
Oakland, California, U.S.A.
Second Place Tie

I've lived 104 years,
since 1911
with a value labeled
one cent more than nothing
I hear they can only see my silhouette now
slightly embossed
and my date
fading
into my smooth coffee face

I was aged
by the touch of generations of hands
I was nurtured by gentle mothers counting
me as a weekly allowance
into tiny palms
which would foolishly spend me
on candy,
on snow globes,
on trinkets

I've lived in the country—coughed dust
in Oklahoma in a year of
depression
I survived in a buzzing city – watched the
stock market
crash
and my worth suddenly heightened

I was thrilled by the playful toss
into a park fountain
I was calmed
nesting in a jazz musician's hat on a street corner
I was lonely when I spent
a decade or so
trapped inside a trench coat pocket, or
lost behind the seat of a 1919 Ford Model T

but then,
a new face picked me off the train station floor
and squeezed me tightly
between their thumb
and index finger
eager to save me for college

or maybe,
just to hold me for good luck
Thoughts on a Violent Culture
by Lisa Zou
Age 16
Chandler, Arizona, U.S.A.
Second Place Tie

Oh, in Galapagos! Let in the lions, take up the fear – and now the ancient river welcomes the lunge and cut and danger and spilling.

You need to learn how quickly the Darwinian distance disappears between the men and the lions. How quickly Occam’s Razor shifts from nature to mankind. How suddenly I became the next ticket buyer; “Oh Lion, grant me two pounds of human carcass.”

Hesitate – death, her salacious selfish soul, awaits.

On the sidelines of the scorched desert, a weaponless woman drinks bloody sangria, her eyes stumble open, her limbs released next to the beasts in a pool of red meat, her body vacillating a fraction of an inch to the left, then a fraction of an inch to the right, the stitches of her bones untangled.

Oh, but somewhere, the lion sees the tremble and chases. Somewhere, the Romanian macho of a man mourns the name of his lost love and death colors herself green and the sky wears grey two shades darker than the hair of the clapping audience.

We watch the lions attack the frequent fighters, pouncing upon a hungry crowd, twisting their spines, stroking the desert terrain awaiting their next targets. We watch the green leaves with the imprint of Franklin’s face flash before the flames.

But you cannot go; you need to remain abstinent from violence, You need to sweep the remnants of lost martyrs, You need to follow the lion that swallowed your sister’s fiancé, as he cried out “They have made lions’ meat of me.”

And we stood silent as small children with smaller hands offered water from the curve of their palms and stroked the lions’ back and a stillness swept through the lions, their tongues parched.

Oh, in Galapagos! You need to learn how gratifyingly the human beasts watched the lions fight and how ‘twas the children who provided for the lions.
Absolution
by Trevor Knepp
Age 16
Chicago, Illinois, U.S.A.
Third Place

Shining congregations bordered in absence
Unnatural but welcome to restful eyes
Such a chorus of sight, a corneal hymn
Brings blind peace –
Perhaps unwanted, but always taken
Whether shawl or shroud, envelopes the traveler
And lays them down to rest.
Part 1 (The Commercial)

Are you experiencing the following signs?

- Feelings of abandonment
- Confusion
- Disgrace
- Lack of closure
- Getting tortured by your own government
- Getting sent to a gulag (and having three generations of your family stay there)

Or are you experiencing:

- Some feelings of relief (but mostly guilt)
- Trouble adjusting to capitalism, free speech (basically all human rights)
- Ghost limb sensation

If you answered “yes” to any of these, chances are that you are a defector or family member of a defector and are experiencing the aftermath of defection from North Korea.

For more information on this condition, please read the following guide.

Part 2 (The Guide)

Generation 1 (North Korea)
When they tell you that your sister has defected, denounce her – wear your best Kim Il Sung lapel pin, the one you bought last “Day of the Shining Star,” and with eyes wide and unbelieving, tell them that you had no idea about the plan, and that she was always the rotten one in the family (though on the inside, you are holding hands with her, thirteen and sixteen caught in the dappled light of perpetual summer.) They will take you and your family anyways, but perhaps you will get sent to Camp 14 instead of Camp 18, a better kind of hell.

Generation 1 (America)
You wear guilt like a straitjacket. A week ago, you sat at your family's dinner table in North Korea, bent, like a perpetual apology. Once, a toothless peasant woman read your lifelines like a pack of tarot cards, telling you that you would live a long life. She did not say anything to your sister right next to you. America is a land of talk shows and therapists, of mending and feeling, or trying to remember and heal, but for you, guilt ticks inside of you like a maddening metronome until all you can see is regret. Perhaps, the best thing to do is to forget.

Generation 2 (gulag, North Korea)
Hunger is the only tattered dress you have ever worn – it does not fit you well. On your fifth birthday, you watched a man get shot, watched him fall to the ground like a ragdoll, and felt nothing. Your mother disappeared with a prison guard and never came back. He came back, however, and stole another woman. Your life can be best explained as a clock, something thought to move forward and change, but really just a circle, a perpetual loop. The best thing to do is survive.

Generation 2 (America)
You will hear about your mother’s past life in the form of a fairytale, an allegory. Your mother is obsessed with the process of baking, of making something whole through a chemical process that cannot be undone. At night, she shakes loose her composed façade and drifts back into her past life in North Korea, crying out the names of ghosts into the implacable darkness. The darkness replies sputtering, with a broken AM radio static. You can never bring back the dead.

Generation 3 (gulag, North Korea)
This is what you know – a barbed wire fence, guards (everywhere), skeletal thin people, and ash. Ash in the clouds, ash in the ground, ash in the eyes of everyone you meet. It was said once that your ancestors lived in the place beyond the fence. And you, a sacrificial lamb, a phoenix, the last generation for and from the ash – survive.

Generation 3 (America)
The best kinds of horror stories are the ones that seem the least real. It was said once that your grandmother defected from North Korea and abandoned her family there. In America, the land of life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness, this place of barbed wire fences and people with paper-skin stretched over sallow-winged bones seems so distant. Be thankful, and embrace opportunity.

Was it worth it?
I didn’t pass my driver’s permit test. I missed nine questions, one too many, failing. The woman at the DMV handed me the test from the scantron saying, “You can retake the test in two weeks.” Embarrassed, I broke down crying as soon as I left the DMV office and got into the car. My mom tried to comfort me, explaining that my uncle didn’t pass his permit test either, and now he’s a surgeon. Apparently he didn’t know he was supposed to study. I studied. Anyways, I didn’t want to be a surgeon.

My grandmother was raised in a small town, Quincy, located near the Sierra Nevada mountains in northern California. Quincy was isolated; its closest cities were at least an hour drive away down a windy road. There was no airport, only a single high school, a movie theater that showed one show a week, and one main street called, Main Street. Quincy was surrounded by mountains full of trees, green texture speckled everywhere. Even being a small town, it had it most everything you would need. There was a hospital, a library, and a DMV. The Quincy DMV is the size of a classroom, with only one woman working at the desk. Pamphlets of the Driver’s Manual lined the wall in different languages, making a colorful mosaic in the over air conditioned room. There was no line, so there was no need to make an appointment; just walk right in. At a busy time, there might be four or five other people there as well. Compared to the nightmare local DMV at home, this was bliss. I could only manage to spend a day in Quincy, since the weather was too hot, and there wasn’t much to do. Quincy in the summer is notorious for being hot and dry. Any skin exposed to sun bakes in the heat, and the high altitude makes you weaker. We would usually end up going into a few local stores, but we would always get lunch at the Polka Dot, a burger and frostie place. It was one of my favorite spots in Quincy, because it was cooler there. The trees overhead provided natural shade in the outside seating areas. The grass met a small river of ice cold, clear mountain water. The stream was only a few feet wide and flowed from a pipe under the street, then out into the meadow. My sister, brother, and I would wade through the ankle deep stream, dragging up dirt and pebbles with our feet. We would have a contest, to see who could hold their feet in the icy water the longest without moving. While we stood numbing our feet in the water, most people getting food would use the red bridge to cross the river.

At the DMV, they handed me the written test, containing 35 multiple-choice questions. I sat along the side, sitting on a stool and filled out the long sheet with a mini pencil. I answered a few questions

“Before driving into an intersection from a stop, you should look,”
   a. left and right only
   b. straight ahead and to the left
   c. left, right, and left again

I chose C.

“To make a right turn onto a two way street from a two way street, start in the right hand lane and end in the,”
   a. left lane
   b. lane closest to the curb
   c. any lane available

I chose B.

After taking the test, I got my fingerprints and picture taken. My hair was oily, poofy from the heat, and not brushed well. I wished I had put on a little makeup that morning, my skin red from a slight burn.

When we would come to the mountains, it was a long-standing tradition to bring up your ugly clothes to wear. Only my family would see your outfits. You would never see anyone you knew, besides your family, and it made a good inside joke and a fun contest of who had the worst clothes. My drawer was full with a few pairs of my dark green PE shorts, jeans ripped too close to the butt, a stained sweatshirt, an unflattering fitting blue fuzzy cardigan my mom knitted, old navy flip flops, and tourist T-shirts that said places like Antarctica and Egypt. When we would come into Quincy, we would dress up a little into our nice clothes, or ones that looked relatively normal. I remember I wore a jeans skirt and a brown tank top, but I didn’t think they would take my picture.

When I came into the car, my mom asked eagerly, “So, How did it go?”

“I didn’t pass,” I replied. In my head I kept thinking over and over how if I had only gotten one more problem right, I would have passed. I thought back to the first question I missed.

“If you are on the left side on a freeway and need to move over three lanes to the right, you should,”
   a. switch lanes all at one time
   b. switch lanes one at a time
   c. dramatically reduce your speed and switch before checking your mirrors

I remembered knowing the answer was B, but reading the first two wrong, I chose A by mistake.

We started driving, and my mom bought me an iced coffee at a health food store called Pangea, to cheer me up. I drank the coffee too quickly, slurping up the milky brown color, and later feeling the slosh of liquid in my belly. My mom sat across from me on a green couch by the window looking up appointment times for the DMV back home. I put the straw to my lips, my eyes feeling tired and puffy after crying, like a balloon deflated.

“You know Emma, a lot of people don’t pass the test the first time. Someday you’ll just laugh about it.”

I took the written test about a month later at the Oakland DMV and passed. They gave the permit test on touch screens this time, each one isolated in a standing gray cubicle. Lines stretched out the door, and people sat waiting for hours in chairs along the edge of the room. The whole department was a poorly operating meat factory, lining up cattle to slaughter in no orderly nor humane system. Even holding my newly earned driver’s permit in hand, I wished to be transported back to Quincy, breathing in the clean mountain air.
Coffee with a Dash of Love
by Ada Kang Li Lim
Age 16
Singapore
Second Place Tie

Ah Huat wakes up at seven in the morning promptly when his alarm clock rings. The noise blares out from the old-fashioned, rusty piece of metal, jarringly different from the hoarse cries of the rooster he remembers from his childhood.

Ah Huat is turning sixty-six years old this year. Even though he has already retired, he believes in waking up early because早起的鸟儿有虫吃1 and早睡早起身体好2. These are habits too ingrained in his mind and heart to be changed.

After washing up, he plods into the living room wearing worn-out slippers towards the altar for his deceased mother, set up next to the architrave that led to the kitchen. Although his hands tremble from old age, he manages to light up three joss sticks, which he sticks into the holder after praying. They will burn out in the afternoon, as they do everyday. He will replace them with new ones before dinner tonight.

On the ancestral tablet, a black-and-white photograph of his mother in her younger days beams at him. With a pang of nostalgia, he remembers that Mother had named him阿发3, which meant “prosperous” – he was born just after World War II, when life was difficult and there was never enough cash to go around. She had hoped that he could be the family’s lucky star. Mother used to sing him a lullaby in her sweet voice while rocking him to sleep. It was in a Chinese dialect he could not understand, yet he can remember each syllable perfectly.

The grey smoke from the joss sticks rises upwards, curling into tendrils that fade away into nothingness. Singapore’s birthday is just around the corner – 9th August. SG504. Ah Huat decides to hang out the national flag at the corridor of his void deck before going to the neighbourhood Kopitiam5 for breakfast.

He shakes the dust off the fragile piece of cloth he retrieves from the storeroom. He has been using this flag for more than thirty years so the red had faded while the white was stained grey from considerable use and from the weather.

He admires the flag for a little while, recalling that the five stars represent democracy, peace, progress, justice and equality, that the crescent moon symbolizes a rising young nation. He chuckles softly to himself; with SG50 around the corner, Singapore was no longer that young. But there is no doubt that she is aging gracefully with a long future ahead. He ties the flag securely around the cool metal railings with raffia strings.

The neighbour’s children brush past him, siblings jostling one another playfully as they set off for school. Behind them, their mother, dressed in office attire, hurries them along, and does not spare Ah Huat a glance. Ah Huat had spent his childhood in kampungs living the kampung spirit6, where everybody knew everybody and nothing was private. Then the government had cleared out those atap houses with zinc roofs, to make way for concrete HDB7 flats. And now, nobody knows anybody and everything is private.

Even though National Day is only arriving in two months, SG50 materials already line the streets, painting the neighbourhood with patriotic shades of red and white. There have been a lot of media advertisements too, and broadcasts of National Days songs old and new are heard. Everybody is making a big deal of the nation’s Golden Jubilee, saying that it is a good time to reflect on the past and dream about the future.

Being one of Singapore’s Pioneer Generation8, Ah Huat knows, of course, how far Singapore has progressed in the past 50 years despite being a little red dot on the map. It is parroted all the time: Singapore had developed from a third world country to a first world nation at a pace much faster than that of its neighbours by capitalizing on its geographical location as a commercial hub attracting business and investment. All this had started with a noble aspiration that came true only with the hard work of Singaporeans.

He also knows that as he grew up, the local scenery grew with him too. After the Singapore River was cleared of its pollution and stench, the CBD9 skyline had evolved from two-story shophouses into “Marina Bay Sands” and “Singapore Flyer”. The roads are now lined with big, strong trees whose umbrella-like crowns provide shade that had once not existed at all. The iconic five-foot-ways had given way to wider pathways to promote the flow of pedestrians.

Ah Huat knows that he will not live to see the transformation of Singapore in the next fifty years.

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1 “The early bird catches the worm.”
2 “It is good for the health to go to sleep and wake up early.”
3 Pronounced as “Ah Fa” in Mandarin. This is a familiar term of endearment.
4 Singapore’s Golden Jubilee which takes place on August 9, 2015. It is also known as “SG50.”
5 Dialect for “coffee shop.”
6 The friendship and understanding between neighbors.
7 Housing Development Board, a government agency that aims to provide cheap and affordable housing for the masses.
8 Living Singaporean citizens who were age 16 and older back in 1965.
9 Central Banking System
After ordering his usual Kopi-O\textsuperscript{10} and soft-boiled eggs from the drink store at the neighbourhood Kopitiam, Ah Huat takes a seat at his usual round table at the front of the store. He has been patronizing this store for the past twenty years; the Kopi-O is good, and the boss is an old friend who always gives him discounts. That was the kampung spirit he missed.

In the near distance, he notices a long queue snaking out from a newly-opened shop. The line is populated by youngsters - large groups of teenagers in uniform hanging out with their friends, and office workers in office attire, eyes glued to their gadgets.

“It’s a new café,” the boss explains, when he personally delivers Ah Huat’s order to his table. “These chain cafés are opening up everywhere, and the young ones flock to them like flies to pigs. At this rate, I’m going to be put out of business soon!”

Ah Huat has heard of these new-fangled, hipster cafés. They sold “ah-mai-li-kan-noe” and “la-tae” and “cup-poh-chi-noe”\textsuperscript{11}. He has never tasted these foreign drinks that sounded weird in his mouth; he preferred his Kopi-O, Teh-C and Kopi Siew Dae.\textsuperscript{12}

“Anyway, I’m getting old. Maybe it’s time to close shop already!” the boss continues to lament.

“What about your grandchildren? Aren’t they going to take over? It’s a traditional business, passed down from generation to generation, right?”

The boss laughed humorlessly. “My grandchildren? They’ve never made Kopi in their life. Wait for them to make Kopi, pigs will climb trees! They would rather work in offices, where there is air-con and good salary.”

“Maybe you should talk to them. Communicate.”

“They always look at their iPad, iPhone. Where is there time to talk to me?”

As if on cue, both men look over to a neighboring table, where a twenty-something year-old office worker is completely fixated on a tiny pixilated screen as he swallows his fishball noodles soullessly.

“It’s as though these people have lost the ability to communicate with their hearts.”

Ah Huat spends the rest of the day seated at a wooden table at the void deck beneath his HDB apartment, watching time take its own sweet time trickling by.

In these past sixty-six years of his life, Ah Huat has seen major changes in Singaporeans’ lifestyles brought about by developments in infrastructure and technology and Singapore’s robust economy - factors that have contributed largely to Singapore’s brighter future. But with these changes came the inevitable losses of the kampung spirit, of communication between the generations, of things he now misses thanks to this “brighter tomorrow”.

And now he wonders how bright Singapore’s brighter tomorrow after this brighter tomorrow will be, and how genuine this new generation of “brighter future” can be.

\textsuperscript{10} Strong black coffee served with sugar.
\textsuperscript{11} Americano, Latte, and Cappuccino
\textsuperscript{12} Strong black coffee served with sugar, tea blended with evaporated milk, and coffee with condensed milk and less sugar.