

2018



International Torrance Legacy Creativity Awards

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 ten years, the International Torrance Legacy Creative Writing Awards competition has attracted hundreds of young writers who took part in two major categories: poetry and short story. In this year of judging 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.

Student participation represented ages 8-18. Poems and stories were assessed in four age-level categories: ages 8-10, 11-12, 13-15, and 16-18. The themes elicited a wide range of creative compositions—some strikingly original and imaginative. Entries also reflected a rich diversity of ideas and talents expressed by students throughout the United States and other countries, including Canada, Israel, New Zealand, Poland, Singapore, and South Korea.

A panel of four judges, comprised of teachers, authors, and editors in the Chicago area, evaluated the quality of student poems and stories. They were Janet Bartell, Chair; Nancy Messman, Co-Chair; Dorothy Massalski; and Sarah von Fremd. Each used rubrics to critique the poetry and stories, focusing for stories on such criteria as organization, character and plot development, and for poetry, linguistic expressiveness, imagery, originality, and depth. All four judges commended the maturity and creativity evident in student writing.

Joan Franklin Smutny

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Creative Writing ~ Ages 8 – 10

Poetry

First Place

Angelina Tao

Rancho Santa Margarita, California
The Amazing Reefs of Molokini

Second Place

Tiana Gowen

Orlando, Florida
What Makes Me Happy

Mai Al Khalifa

West Riffa, Bahrain
Fabulously Famous

Jawaher Faisal Abdulla Alawadi

A'Ali, Bahrain
Don't Judge Me

Third Place

Zhong Xiangjia

Singapore
Failure or Success

Li Zezheng

Xiamen City, China
The Moonlight of Gulangyu Island

Stories

First Place

Faris Shamma

Vestal, New York
How Willie Became a Wizard

Benjamin Webb

Green Brook, New Jersey
Home

Second Place

Ruijia Peng

Singapore
A Day in Humanity's Future

Samar Mohammed Abdul Aleem

Muharraq, Bahrain
Messy Ellie

Third Place

Mythri Raghavender

Wroclaw, Poland
Time Train to Ancient Greece

The Amazing Reef of Molokini

Angelina Tao
Rancho Santa Margarita, California
1st Place

Shaped like a cupped hand or crescent moon,
This little island holds a small part of the sea.
Looking around at the water, sun, and rocky land—
What's so special about this breezy place before
me?

Wearing my snorkel and bathing suit, too,
I stand on the edge of our bobbing, white boat.
Our tour guide's behind us instructing aloud:
“Don't sink! Relax, kick your flippers, and float!”

With a careful leap, I plunge into the blue,
Cool water and bubbles envelop my sight.
After a few blinks and kicks to adjust myself,
I stare below me and my senses are in delight!

A brand new world beneath the waves!
All the colors, all the fish, all the shapes!
(In my excitement, I swallow salty water)
The bumpy coral look like crunchy grapes.

Like a flapping, flying saucer,
A large stingray glides by—not too far away.
I'm careful to avoid its deadly tail...
I don't want to die today!

Rainbows of fish swim and swirl 'round the reef.
Many are speckled and some solid yellow,
Whose patterns remind me of fun cartoon faces,
And crabs that look like they're playing the cello!

Creepy eel heads poke in and out from the rocks—
Wait, what's that crawling along the sand?
Why, hello! It's Mr. Octopus!
Plodding along on his eight slippery hands.

Suddenly, I hear a loud voice above my head,
A megaphone telling us it's time to leave.
Like a fish plucked out from the water,
Leaving this watery paradise makes my heart grieve.

Wrapped in a towel, the wind drying my hair,
I wave goodbye to my wondrous sea friends.
I'm thankful for our brief time spent together,
And hope to visit their beautiful world again.

What Makes Me Happy

Tiana Gowen
Orlando, Florida
2nd Place Tie

If the wind in the sails or the breeze in the trees
Will ever have its own agony
Then the leaves will blow
And the river will flow
Every ripple in the water in the water
Every leaf blowing away farther

While people are trotting across the sand
Oh, however that would be so grand
When the colors of the sky turn neon bright
Everyone knows that day turns to night

When the sand tames down
When the water has drowned

While the bright stars are up high
Where all birds can fly
When the sky turns dark blue
Not even white color of a sliver of glue

The only sound that remains
Is the slight whistle of trains
Or maybe the blowing sound
Of an airplane going around
Could be the buzz of night bugs
Or the smearing of dirt black slugs

While owls are hooting with a high pitched voice
As mama bird picks worms of her choice
When the sun rises all are at glee
As people enjoy a morning cup of tea

Now birds are chirping happily about
Fishers are gathering their trout
This morning time as you can see
This is morning time as it can be

Fabulously Famous

Mai Ahmed Al Khalifa
West Riffa, Bahrain
2nd Place Tie

I watch the sea of faces
In the stadium,
That seem gigantic
As the
Ocean floor.

Simple, Sensible, Silence—
I prepare to run down the padded vault runway
And onto the spring board,
Then the horse

The stadium appears to take a deep breath,
Waiting
Waiting for me—
Strong shoulders, leg strength, body weight, and
maximum speed.

I am fabulously famous!

Don't Judge Me

Jawaher Faisal Abdulla Alawadi
A'Ali, Bahrain
2nd Place Tie

Sometimes I imagine my future
Sometimes I imagine I'm in a different culture
And sometimes even an elf
Or stuck in space all by myself
Imagination is fun, but when it comes to dinner time,
imagination is done!

In reality, life was tough and I had enough
So, whoever thought I was ugly
Whoever thought I was filthy
Whoever thought I was clumsy
Well, if you judge me, you have no time to love me!

It is always comfortable to jump back into your thoughts
But sometimes you have to face your knots

Failure or Success

Zhong Xiangjia
Singapore
3rd Place Tie

A small island, helpless and weak.
People will never think of Singapore, as
One of the richest countries.
The shocking truth is that,
Singapore is doomed to fail.
Nobody will agree that,
Singapore has one of the best educational systems in the world, and,
Singapore's airport topped the world.
Giving up,
Singapore's way of doing things, will never be
Perseverance and determination.
Singapore's way to go, is,
Laze around all day long and never earn a single penny.
Singapore will never, ever,
Achieve success.
Singapore,
A small nation, tiny and almost invisible.

(Read again from the bottom to the top)

The Moonlight of Gulangyu Island

Li Zezheng
Xiamen City, China
3rd Place Tie

The moon lights up the sky,
Brightens the shadow of human mind.
The freedom time I like
Just as the Polaris at night.

How Willie Became a Wizard

Faris Shamma
Vestal, New York
1st Place Tie

Far away, in a magical land, lived a young, clumsy wizard named William Irin Zard, or "W. I. Zard." All his friends and family called him Willie. He was always bad at wizard school, but always wanted to learn magic.

One day, he came back from playing with his friends and told his dad, "Daddy, can you please teach me how to make the flying potion? All my friends have mastered it. Why can't I?" asked Willie, eagerly.

"But Willie, you won't listen to me! You never do!" said his dad.

Willie was very disappointed. But fortunately, his father didn't want to be rude, so he promised Willie he would teach him the potion the following day.

The next morning, Willie awoke when the sky was still scarlet-red and rushed past the large cupboards full of all kinds of wonderful and weird spells. His favorite spell was the "Hair Growing Bear Liver." When he arrived at the laboratory of his great father, he asked Willie to get these ingredients:

1. Tears of a river crocodile
2. Ash of the whiskers of a black cat
3. 100 grams of ant brain
4. Half a liter of liquefied skunk gas
5. 5 eggs of tsetse flies.

Willie instantly sprinted to get these weird and wacky ingredients to create the ultimate flying potion. He first went to get the tears of a crocodile and did so successfully. He collected all the things his dad told him to find, except one stinky, yet important thing: the liquefied skunk gas. Instead, he replaced it with goblin saliva and stomach acid from a raccoon.

When he got home, his dad was already setting up the gentle fire to make the potion. When putting all the ingredients into the big cauldron, Willie and his dad saw a lot of smoke coming out. The strong acid of the boiling mixture burned down the cauldron, and ... BOOM! The house turned to dust and hot flaming ashes. Luck must have been smiling on them, or they wouldn't have survived. However, they became homeless and poor, so they were forced to beg on the streets.

Some weeks later, Willie couldn't take it anymore: he was hungry, tired, and miserable. He finally confessed to his dad.

"Dad! I'll tell you the truth", cried Willie. "I didn't really put in the necessary ingredients. Instead of liquefied skunk gas, I put goblin saliva and raccoon stomach acid!"

"Good thing you told me, son. I knew there was something wrong with that potion! There is only one way to reverse this curse. But you won't like it," said his dad, while laying his back on some bricks. "Instead of putting the liquefied skunk gas into the potion ... you need to drink it!"

Willie hesitated about what he would do: drink the skunk gas, or live poor forever? Willie bravely said to himself that night: I'll do it. Whatever it takes for us to go back home. He drank the liquid with great disgust. Fortunately, his dad was correct: they were back in their own house!

From that day on, Willie was meticulous with his work. He was always energetic, paid attention in class, and so became one of the most successful wizards in the whole Middle Ages. When he was asked who helped him, he said proudly it was his dad and some revolting drink ...

Home

Benjamin Webb
Green Brook, New Jersey
1st Place Tie

“Come on, wake up! We don't have all day!” a voice shouted.

The ground beneath me was fluffy, softer than anything I had ever felt. I opened my eyes and saw a coffee-brown husky with a white collar staring me in the face. The room was a soft pink color and it wasn't decorated except for a small trough but fancier, made out of some sort of metal. There was a fountain in the corner shooting water and a bendy straw in the fountain.

“My name's Fluf. Nice to meet you!” the husky said.

“Where am I?” I asked. “And how can you talk? You're a dog!”

“Hmm, it seems you're not very cultured. Welcome to Sunak Central where all of us dogs built our homes. Take a look outside!”

I looked out the window and saw a huge street that went on for what seemed like forever. Maybe it did go on forever. The houses looked like small cottages but they all had names written on the houses. One house said “Furr” and another said “Barc.” It seemed like a normal place but with a few little sprinkles of uniqueness.

“Come on, let's go to the museum! You can learn some history!” Fluf exclaimed.

He ran out a small doggy door in the room that was almost hidden by the carpet.

“Oh, you might have to crawl. Sorry not sorry!” Fluf said from outside.

I didn't mind squeezing out the door. The fluffy carpet didn't give me a rug burn like a normal carpet would.

“Come on!” Fluf yelled as he started running down the street.

“Don't you have cars?!” I panted after running for a few minutes.

“What are cars?” Fluf asked. “We just have legs!”

As I ran, I noticed the pavement didn't feel normal. It felt bouncy and soft. I jumped up and down on the pavement and it bounced me back up like a trampoline.

After running for a few more minutes, Fluf stopped at a building the size of a mansion. In big letters at the top of the building it said: “Mew-sium. How the Dogs Won Against Cats.”

“Come on in!” Fluf said as he ran through another doggy door.

“Not this again!” I moaned as I got down on my knees.

The inside of the museum (or I guess mew-sium) was a big open room with high ceilings. Paintings and writing were on the walls and the floor had more of that fluffy carpet. I saw a group of golden retrievers and a few pugs wandering around.

“Look, this is where it all began!” Fluf shouted and pointed to what seemed like an essay along with a picture. It said:

The Dog Revolution

After many hard years of dogs being ruled by cats and many unfair laws (such as no fluffy carpet, and you can't ask for help with math homework) the dogs had had enough and started the Dog Revolution.

The Battle Of Borkville 3385-3384

The war's first battle started when one cat scratched a dog on the nose. The battle was one Dog and Cat chase (not Cat and Mouse, which happened in 2289-2286).

The battle went on until the dogs were trapped in their hometown of Borkville, surrounded by evil cats. There was nothing to do except chase the cats away (wait why didn't they do that in the first place!?) and so they chased the cats away to victory. And that, my puppies, is how the dogs got independence and freedom.

"Do you want to look at more history?" Fluf asked.

"No, I'm good for now," I said and crawled out the doggy door.

"Why don't we get some food at the local cafe?" Fluf said as he ran away in a different direction.

"Ok!" I yelled. "I don't think I'd like to have dog treats though!"

We ran for a while until we reached a small building that looked like a statue. It was white and shaped like a bone. On the building was a huge sign that said: "Cafe – For All Your Doggy Needs."

"Come in!" Fluf said as he crawled through ANOTHER doggy door.

"I'll be fine outside," I mumbled but found myself crawling again.

Inside there was a huge case reaching to the ceiling, filled with strange pastries.

"Mmm, my favorite," Fluf said. "Double dog fudge triple bacon scented donut!"

"Umm, what?" I said and laughed.

I looked at the case trying to find something normal to eat. Options were "super sausage superior scrumptious soup scone" or "dipper doggy donut with ham and peanut butter."

"Do you just have a plain pastry?" I asked.

"If you mean bologna and super ham sandwich with extra peanut butter deep fried with chocolate, here you go!" the labrador behind the counter said and pulled out what seemed like a chocolate square.

"An excellent choice!" Fluf said as he gave the labrador a rubber looking sphere with a dog print on it.

"Let's eat!" Fluf said as he took a bite of whatever he got.

I reluctantly took a bite of my sandwich after sitting there awkwardly for a good minute. The sandwich wasn't that bad. I couldn't really taste any meat because of the overpowering taste of the peanut butter.

After we ate, Fluf went through the doggy door with ease. I wished I could do the same. When we were out Fluf said, "We should get you home, right? Unless you want to stay here."

I felt like I was struck by lightning when he asked me. I missed my family, but as Fluf looked at me, wagging his tail and panting, I didn't know which to choose. A group of golden retrievers ran past us with their mom, and after that everything seemed still. No wind blowing, nothing. All I saw was Fluf staring at me.

"I'll sta- wait no, I want to go back home!" I said suddenly.

I couldn't tell Fluf to save my life if he was angry, understanding, or sad.

"Ok, if we go back to my house, I think I can take you back."

We ran all the way back and didn't talk much. I felt sad but happy at the same time. I crawled through Fluf's doggy door and sat on the floor.

"Just sit still ok?" Fluf said. "I think if you just close your eyes and think about going home, you can get home. Stay safe!"

"Bye Fluf," I said. "Maybe I can come back soon!"

I closed my eyes and thought about home. Nothing happened. I sat there for a while. Nothing happened. But suddenly, I felt a weird tingling feeling. The ground seemed to shake and I opened my eyes to see some sort of blue light swirling around me. Blinded by the strange light, I felt like I was falling. I fell on something hard and found out I was in my bedroom. I had fallen on a small table in my room.

"Ow!" I exclaimed but luckily, I didn't break anything. I heard noise downstairs and quickly went down to find my Mom, Dad, and brother around a small coffee-brown husky with a white collar wagging his tail at me.

"Look what we found!" my dad exclaimed. "He was lost on the street so we brought him home! He had a collar on him that said Fluf on it. What do you think?"

I stared at the dog for a minute and then smiled.

A Day in Humanity's Future

Peng Ruijia
Singapore
2nd Place Tie

Harsh, bright light from the lamps all around illuminated everywhere. Although this world does not lack light, it lacks that warm feeling of sunshine.

It was 24 December 3054. Christmas Eve. I checked my watch. It was 5pm sharp. I stood up from my work table and proceeded towards the lift. I was at Ground level. While waiting for the lift to arrive, I looked out of the window. From here, I could see above ground. Nothing in sight - not the plants, not anything - was in good condition and the air was black from pollution.

Sighing, I stepped into the lift and pressed the button for Basement 55. Both the exit of my office and the entrance to a tunnel leading to the food and water rationing station for my house area were located on that level. What did the word "home" even mean now? I wondered. Before humanity had damaged the environment so badly that we could no longer live in the above world, home was a place where we felt that we belonged. We always had a warm feeling and constant longing for our home. However, now, home no longer gave warmth and longing to our hearts. It seemed more like just a dwelling.

Now, what we ate for the three meals a day was decided by the people in charge of the food rationing, due to the lack of food when humanity began moving underground a week ago. Our food and water supplies were running low, even though we could eat underground roots such as potato and carrot. Because there was hardly enough food or water for everyone, those staples had to be rationed. Everyone took their breakfast before going to work or school, lunch in the cafeteria of their workplace or school, and dinner after work or after finishing their homework.

As I stood at the back of the long, snaking queue at the food and water rationing station, I thought, *the food we have now is barely a mouthful for each meal, and we cannot even have a long drink!* Food and water were so scarce that I found it hard to believe that we once had these things in abundance when we were in the above world.

When it was my turn, I took my dinner for the day, which was a few pieces of potato and carrot that I could finish in a second, considering how hungry I was, and a 150ml bottle of water. Walking down the tunnel that led to my home, I sighed. Life seemed to have less and less meaning. Boom! I was jerked out of my thoughts in shock at this loud bang, followed by a child's cries, "My water! My water!"

I looked around, trying to find the source of this commotion. A scrawny boy was sprawled on the floor, and around him seemed to be some water.

"Oh no! My mother is sick and I came to take water and food for her and now the water is spilled! What can I do?" the boy exclaimed while sobbing.

No one answered him, for no one knew what to do either. Now, everyone was rationed only 150ml of water for the evening. No more is no more. If the water was spilled, people could only wait until the next morning.

“My mother has been sick for several days! She desperately needs water!” the little boy cried out.

The people passing by sighed, shaking their heads, and left without looking back. The boy looked down at the ground, standing still with a hopeless expression on his face. I understood the feeling of thirst. However, now everyone seemed to be in the desert with such little water in their possession. Even though we would not die of thirst, we would always be on the verge of thirst. I walked towards my home, but after a few steps, I turned back. The boy was still standing alone like a statue. Under the cold light of the lamps that illuminated the tunnel, his shadow seemed skinny and long.

I hesitated, then walked back to the boy and patted his shoulder, and told him in a gentle tone, “Go back home, child. Don’t let your mother wait too long for you.”

The boy had already stopped crying, but to my surprise, at my words, he collapsed onto the ground and whimpered, “My mother has had a fever for a week now, and she only has such little water every day. Her fever never gets better. Today, I even spilled the water; it’s all my fault!”

I felt my heart squeeze in pain for the young boy. Tears that had been contained for too long began to fill my eyes. Long before we moved underground, water was plentiful and we could have a long drink any-time. This water now makes everyone long for it. If we had known what would happen, we would never have damaged the environment so badly, resulting in the situation we are in now, living underground in the endless night.

I took out my bottle of water and passed it to the little boy, “Child, hurry home, don’t let your mother become worried for you. Take care of your mother well.”

The boy had a surprised look on his face. He hesitated, not daring to touch the water that even money could not buy.

“Merry Christmas!” I exclaimed to the young boy. “This is your Christmas present.”

The boy took the bottle of water, bowed deeply to me as a sign of gratitude that could not be put into words, and set off towards home, trying to hold back his tears of joy and gratitude, with the precious bottle of water held tightly in his arms.

Messy Ellie

Samar Mohammed Abdul Aleem
Muharraq, Bahrain
2nd Place Tie

This is a story about a girl named Ellie. Ellie was a very messy little girl. She never did her chores or cleaned her room. Mom always got angry.

She came home one day and her mom told her, "You must clean your room before dinner."

Ellie said, "No, I don't like cleaning my room. And I won't do it!"

Mom got angry and said, "You will not get a bite to eat till you clean your room! And from now on, you will be called Messy Ellie!"

Ellie went to her room and sat at her desk. She laid her head on the table and closed her eyes.

When she woke up, she was in a different world. It was a world full of litter and trash. It was even smelly. Ellie didn't like it. She started looking around to find a way back home. She walked along the path and saw a little girl.

She asked her, "Where am I? What is this place? And how do I get back home?"

The little girl smiled and said, "You are Ellie! We have been waiting for you. This is Ellie land and you are going to save us from the evil queen, Messy Ellie."

Ellie was scared and said, "I am just a little girl so how can I save you from the evil queen?"

The little girl said, "There is a magic well at the top of the hill. You must take the water using the magic bucket and spill it on the queen who lives in that messy castle."

Ellie went up the hill and found the magic well. The water was soapy and pink. She picked up the bucket and filled it with the water. She went to the castle and saw the queen, who looked just like her, but smellier and messier. She took a step back and spilled the water on the queen who screamed and fell.

When the queen got up, she smiled and said, "Thank you so much for helping me. What is your name?"

Ellie looked at her and said, "I am Ellie."

The queen said, "It's nice to meet you. I am Queen Squeaky clean Ellie."

"Can you help me get back home? I miss my Mom!" Ellie said.

"Yes, I can. You have to help me clean my castle first," Queen Ellie said.

Ellie agreed and picked up the magic bucket and started cleaning the castle. When she was done, she sat down on the throne and closed her eyes. When she opened them, she was on her chair in her room. Ellie smiled and then frowned. She saw her room—very messy and a little smelly. She started cleaning and when she was done, she ran down the stairs and saw her mom in the kitchen.

Ellie hugged her and said, "Oh! Mom I missed you, I cleaned my room. I don't want to rule a world of litter and trash. I don't want to be Queen Messy Ellie."

Mom was surprised.

She hugged her and said, "Good girl. You are not Messy Ellie; you are Squeaky Clean Ellie. Don't worry, it was just a dream. Come and eat your dinner."

When Ellie finished her dinner, she went upstairs and saw something shine under her desk. She looked underneath and saw the magic bucket. Ellie picked it up and put it in her cupboard and smiled. She was happy to be home; she was happy she cleaned her room. And most of all, she was happy because she wasn't Messy Ellie anymore.

Time Train to Ancient Greece

Mythri Raghavender
Wroclaw, Poland
3rd Place

One summer's day, Jack and Lily, twins aged 15, were on the train to Salisbury enroute to meet their uncle. Time went by as smoothly as the landscapes changed outside the window. Suddenly, the train went all dark inside and outside. They thought they were going through a tunnel.

When the light came back after a few minutes, Jack noticed that the people inside appeared different. They were now wearing chitons (big squares of cloth), held in place by pins at the shoulders and a belt around the waist.

Just as they wondered, the train stopped somewhere. Everyone started getting off. Jack and Lily also got off to find out where they were. Exploring this new world, they noticed it didn't look like the UK anymore! The neat brick countryside houses were gone and now there were huge mansions and small mud houses. Jack and Lily stared with astonishment at the scenes spread before them: horse drawn carriages, soldiers practicing sword fighting, and children studying on wax boards. Where were they? Looking back, they noticed that the train behind them had also now vanished into thin air! There was no way to return!

"Γεια σας, Καλώς ήρθατε στην Αθήνα! Έχω ένα δώρο για σένα!" said someone, patting Jack on the shoulder.

"Wh...whan...what?" Jack sputtered.

Repeating in English, "Hollo, me name is Aetius. Welcom(sic)to Athens. Me have gift thing for boy!"

Saying that, he gave a small package and ran away.

Jack picked up the package and tore open the wrapping. Inside was a pocket translator, a map, a few drachmas (greek coins) and a wax board with something written on it. Lily was intrigued by the map and coins while Jack was testing the translators.

"This map shows the whole of Athens!" remarked Lily. Jack had been looking at the wax board and found something astonishing. "Lily, see what's written here.

Help! I am locked up in the Parthenon. The translators and the map are to help you along the way. To enter, use the code eagle, square and water. I'm in dungeon 28.

~Signed, Queen Cleopatra~

"Omg! CLEOPATRA? Why, we must have time travelled into her era! I think we are in 45 BC!" cried Lily with astonishment.

"Let's not waste time here, Lily. There's a queen to save!" announced Jack.

They used the map to trace their way through the busy streets to the Parthenon. At the Parthenon, they saw a ticket counter with a sign saying, 5 GD ανά ώρα, 10 GD χωρίς όριο, δωρεάν για παιδιά κάτω των 12 ετών. Jack translated it as 5 GD per hour, 10 GD for no limit & free for kids under 12. They paid 20GD and went inside.

Looking for the way to the dungeon, they went through tunnels and knocked on walls but to no avail! They couldn't find it. After a while, Jack stumbled upon a dark staircase and decided to climb down. At the end of the steps, was a locked door with symbols. Using the wax board, Lily read out the words eagle, square, water. Jack pressed the buttons accordingly and the door opened! Stepping in, they gasped. It was a huge dark space with hundreds of dungeons! Jack noticed some diagrams on the wall near the entrance which looked like a map.

Using a torch to study it closely, he exclaimed, "This drawing shows the way around the dungeon! And here, this is it. Dungeon 28!" Jack shouted.

The teens started running in the direction and reached 28, where they found the most renowned and beautiful Queen Cleopatra who now looked quite a state!

Her hair was messy, her eyes were red and her hand was bleeding. She must have put up a fight! They started looking for the keys which they found hanging on the wall next to the cell. Using the key they opened the door and helped Cleopatra out.

“Are you okay? Why are you hurt? Who did this to you?” the twins asked curiously.

“Let's not get ahead of ourselves now, shall we? Introduce yourselves, please.” said Cleopatra.

“Of course, my name is Jack and my sister's name is..”

Then Lily interrupted and said “Lily! We are very pleased to meet you.” she nodded with a bow.

Cleopatra acknowledged their greeting and then recounted how she had been kidnapped and locked into this dungeon by some unknown people.

“Whoa...but if you were stuck here all the time how did you send a message to us?” questioned Lily.

“Oh...yes. Well, it was more of a fluke. I found this boy delivering food to all the prisoners in the dungeon. I befriended him and asked him to help. And that's how the package reached you.”

She then asked, “Do you have any water? I'm parched!”

Handing her bottle to Cleopatra, Lily replied “Of course! I have some in my bag...here you go. You must be so tired! Drink up!”

She gulped it down and beamed, “We'd better be heading to my palace now. Some unfinished work to do and we better do it fast as you have only 12 hours to stay here!”

“But where are all the guards? We didn't see anyone on the way in, nor do we see anyone here.” asked Jack with a puzzled look.

“Well, the guards are all on strike, demanding better wages.”

So with encouraged hearts, they left for the palace. Meanwhile, at the palace, Coreos, the leader of the opposition was about to be coronated King.

Cleopatra entered the Palace hall just at the right time and announced, “Stop! I am here! This man who you are appointing king, he's a traitor! Put him in jail at once!” she shouted.

Everyone looked surprised but also delighted to see their beloved queen back.

“Yes, Your Majesty!” said one of the allies named Maximus, blocking the door so that Mr. Coreos could not get out.

“Hey, aren't you The Spider Phantom who steals from and kidnaps rich people? You should be put behind bars! Guards, take him away!” commanded Maximus and a screaming Coreos was taken to the dungeons.

Maximus then asked “Your Majesty, are you okay?”

“I am fine, thanks to these two wonderful children. I order that they be rewarded 1000 gold coins each and be well taken care of until their stay here ends.”

Maximus bowed in agreement and asked the children to follow him.

They relished their food and were also entertained by musical performances.

Afterwards, they went to Cleopatra's chambers to say goodbye.

Jack had a question. “Where did you learn English?”

“I learned most of the languages with the help of the translator,” replied Cleopatra.

Lily asked, “Who gave you the translator?”

“I knew you would ask sooner or later. Your uncle gave it to me.” she added with a wink.

They went outside only to find a grand horse carriage waiting for them. They hopped in and it took them towards the Time Barrier. Jack and Lily were just in time! When they entered into it, there was a train tagged, Time Train to Modern Salisbury. They looked at Ancient Greece one last time and stepped into the train to continue their way to Salisbury.

The train came to a stop waking them up. They had reached Salisbury! Jack and Lily took their luggage and found their uncle waiting for them near the exit.

They hugged him and he asked, “How was your time in Ancient Greece?”

Creative Writing ~ Ages 11 – 12

Poetry

First Place

Courtney Wu

Town and Country, Missouri
Planets

Callum Wyer

Houston, Texas
Ballad of the Journey Through the
Rain

Second Place

Chloe Tan Yong Han

Singapore
A Reluctant Adventure

Deena Al-Dahwi

El Paso, Texas
Generations at a Crossroad!

Third Place

Nadia Mohamed Ridzal

Singapore
This Unpredictable World

Marissa Liu

Collierville, Tennessee
Letter to Red Pond

Stories

First Place

Mindy Zheng Yiqing

Singapore
Tomorrow, I Will Be Free

Second Place

Koh Tze Hun Jerald

Singapore
Twinkle Twinkle

Sonakshi Nag

Singapore
Different

Third Place

Naomi Tan Min

Singapore
Bullied

Harene Kim

Seoul, South Korea
Light

Planets

Courtney Wu
Town and Country, Missouri
1st Place Tie

To Mercury I started off,
And I knew that I shouldn't scoff
At the alien
Who almost jumped in
The pool that formed
From his tears that adorned
The land burning beneath my feet.
I knew living there would not be an easy feat.
I left for a different adventure.

To Venus I started off,
The land there was awfully rough.
I navigated my way on the land.
It was hard to see, for there was lots of sand.
When I found my way back,
Off I was into the black.

To Earth I went.
It was there where every coin I had was spent.
I was from there,
And I took great care
That aliens could touch nothing, not even a pear.
Off I went with little care.

To Mars I started off,
And once every hour I did cough.
When I got there,
I was surprised because it was so bare
It was so small,
I could hardly see it at all
From the telescope in my shuttle.
The dust on there was subtle,
And I left for somewhere else.

To Jupiter I went.
I really wish someone had lent
Me a really good comic book
Because things there were not off the hook.
They say people go to Jupiter
Only to get stupider,
But I was not there for that,
So off I went with my bright pink hat.
To Saturn I said I went
To look at the words that people spent
Talking about its grand rings.
It was as if I had sprouted wings.
Anyways, I left into the stars.

To Uranus I started off,
And I couldn't care enough
How blue it was.
They all said it was because
Of some weird hydrogen,
And off I went in ten.

To Neptune I went as if it were a vacation,
Only it was my last destination.
I didn't care for the stench
Coming from the moldy cheese under my bench.
I knew that I would be back soon
And would be sleeping under the moon.

The Solar System is a thing
That will always bring
Life, joy, and playfulness.
If it wasn't for this, I wouldn't have any cheerfulness!
I will always appreciate it,
And now I get to go somewhere where I really do fit.

Ballad of the Journey Through the Rain

Callum Wyer
Houston, Texas
1st Place Tie

Away we marching go,
A'through this cursed rain.
A'tales we told are heard in vain.
We have no knowledge of this terrain.
All we have are what remains.
Walking up this inclined plain.

Away we go, through a cave,
Dodging bats that fly away,
Sighting snakes along the way.
We have no knowledge of this terrain.
All we have are what remains.
Walking up this inclined plain.

We still a'travel so,
We give the tales one more go,
Fighting through the rain.

We marched up to the castle,
Ready to lay siege.
Up the stairs,
Through the door,
Climbing down the balcony.

In wait it hid, all silent still.
Then loud and shrieking, a ghastly shrill.
In front of us, a most gruesome beast.
So twisted, huge, six legs, five eyes.
A most terrifying beast
One could surmise.

With 10-foot wings it thumped and buzzed.
So loud the buzz
The castle trembled,
Shook and shook, the men they stumbled.

One man stepped up, his sword held high
And drove it through the beastly heart
Until it buzzed no more.

A cheer rang out with shouts of joy,
For we had slayed a most gruesome beast.
In celebration, a triumphant feast.
Afterward we retreated east
To tell the tale of our quest and ploy.

And fighting through the rain once more,
We slowly ambled east.

A Reluctant Adventure

Chloe Tan Yong Han
Singapore
2nd Place Tie

When Hansel and Gretel
Stumbled along the path
In search of their gingerbread
home- No one asked them
if they liked gingerbread

It has always been assumed
That Cinderella likes balls, and
Red Riding Hood likes red.

Belle might not have enjoyed
The company of the Beast --
These are all assumptions that
Have been made —
Reluctant adventures that fairytale
Heroes and Heroines embarked on.

Likewise, no one has asked me if
I would like to be a teenager
If I would enjoy venturing
Beyond my comfort zone
Into the big unknown

I would much rather
Keep the company of the three little Bears
Or even the three little pigs,
Than discover the wonders of
Trigonometry.

Generations at a Crossroad!

Deena Al-Dahwi
El Paso, Texas
2nd Place Tie

I am delighted to be from a generation,
Who worked their fingers to the bone,
Devoted to inspire their children,
Never wasting a breath to moan,

Now I look up at my withered face,
My hands, a sea of wrinkles too,
Each crease a symbol of perseverance,
A sign of the hardships I've been through,

Oh, the honor of hard work!
It bestows a sense of true dignity within,
Self-satisfaction and pride expand,
Working even harder becomes built-in.

Now look at the current generation!
Changed for the worse...I'm appalled to see,
Where is their empathy, their sweat, their work ethic?
We're hit in the face with their reality.

We never had such short cuts,
For our results, we slaved,
This generation has grown idle,
Due to the path technology has paved,

"Generation Now" seems not bothered,
Apathy has overcome their world,
Even everyday tasks have become effortless,
The honor of hard work hurled!

For I am an aging man,
To me, laziness is a stranger,
A stranger that could devastate your life,
Leaving the future of loved ones in danger,

I am delighted to be from a generation,
Where innovation is at our core,
Our scientists discover answers to enigmas,
And the rest of the universe we explore,

Oh, the glory of being creative,
It pumps confidence through our veins,
Propelling us to have natural leadership,
So eventually we take the reins,

Used rightly technology helps us
Assist millions in everyday life,
Remember: WE will shape tomorrow's future,
And protect it from any harm or strife.

What really strikes me is,
The unjust perspective of the elderly,
Assuming our generation is lazy,
Ignoring how we work cleverly!

We work to make life smoother,
For any nationality, religion, or race,
So that life can tremendously improve,
And move briskly to glory and grace.

The older generation are trapped,
Always dwelling on the past,
Not thinking about what lies ahead,
Or the possibilities so vast,

For I am a teenage girl,
I respect the efforts of the old,
However, I'm determined to plough through,
Whatever wondrous tomorrow may hold!

I am delighted not to be from any generation,
I've been around for billions of years,
I'm not concerned about technology versus
hard work,
I'm surrounded by looming spheres,

Oh, the honor that I carry the human race,
On this broad back of mine,
My lands are filled with glorious history,
My vast waters gleam and shine.
You can fight over who truly has,
The Honor or the rightful Glory
But beware: Pay Attention to me,
Or there'll be a gruesome end to your story,

If humans don't start to preserve my lands,
If humans don't start to take heed,
If generations don't resolve their bickering,
If humans don't manage their greed,

There'll be no technology nor hard work,
To worry about anymore,
Arid deserts and polluted lands will remain,
Death, destruction and gore!

For I am the Extraordinary Earth,
Whatever the generation, I'll still be,
Endangered if you neglect me,
Pay Attention! And care for me!

This Unpredictable World

Nadia Farhana Mohamed Ridzal
Singapore
3rd Place Tie

Stepping out into the sun
Its brightness blinding me
In this unpredictable world,
Who knows what's really meant to be

My heart overflowing
My mind overthinking
My soul hurting
The world shaking

The clock ticks
Time passes
A pen clicks
Fog on her glasses

Sometimes putting up walls becomes tiring
Sometimes the filters slip, leaving me exposed
Sometimes I see her smiling
And I wish my feelings could just be disposed

She doesn't feel the same way
I'm so very sure
I don't know how much longer
My heart can endure

Why is love so conflicting?
When I see her my heart aches yet she makes me feel content
Why is love so demanding?
Oh, the amount of effort I put in to make sure we were not broken, just
bent

I can't let it go
Maybe I will never be able to
Maybe I just don't want to know
What is false and what is true

So I will leave;
Leave her with whoever she is meant to be with
And maybe then I will believe;
Believe that us happening is just a myth

So I give her one more smile
And though my heart wants to
I don't stay for even a while
I don't think about what is false and true

But then she searched for me
And for the first time I wished that she would leave me alone
I wished that I could be free,
Free from the feelings that had taken control

But no, she came time and time again
To show me that she cared
I couldn't seem to remember when,
When I had even considered letting my feelings be declared

But her presence empowered me
And her smile motivated me

So I decided to come straight out,
And tell her the truth
Unlike what I expected, there was no crying, no shouts
There was just the two of us, two youths

Eager to find out what was false and true
Eager to find out what we needed to do
Eager to explore what seemed impossible
Eager to brave the wonderful and the horrible

After all, we only live once

In this unpredictable world
We only get one chance
So every risk we take is crucial
And every move we make can't be undone

Oh, who would've thought
We got our facts all wrong
She loves me and I love her
But in this unpredictable world, it may not last very long

Often I wonder what is false and what is true
Often I wonder what I need to do
Often I wonder about what seems impossible
But in this unpredictable world, with just a snap of our fingers the wonderful could become horrible

And it could all be gone.

Letter to Red Pond

Marissa Qifei Liu
Collierville, Tennessee
3rd Place Tie

You
with the veiled face
Why make a story for attention
Your mossy sheath could be a crossroad
or alley
That I desire.

You
must go
though I will wither.
Your gown of lavender and daffodils cannot hide you
Eternally

I will resist.

No benevolence in those footmen of yours
Who feed on raw flesh and bones,
In a semblance of the golden autumn
left from your own shade tree

You worry
I know
That closed, shameful face of yours
You are not nature
You are ruthless

What is enough?

How many memories must you shatter
The harmless kin
fall
To satisfy your murky veins
It is Time to make your amends

I've seen
Your pale hand outstretched
that smirk
Oh, don't fret
I'll lead them to your grisly palace
For once or twice is not
Enough
you cannot stop

Deliver your adieus
And savor your last breaths
Cradled in Mother Nature's gracious arms
You were never meant to be here
You never will be

I will uncover you,
Red Pond.

Tomorrow I Will Be Free

Mindy Zheng Yiqing
Singapore
1st Place

The girl sat quietly on the ground, eyes gazing at something far away. If one didn't look carefully, one would have thought her to be a statue.

The room was a blinding white, nothing more than a small, tight cube. The walls seemed to loom over the small figure, seemingly pressing closer and closer with each passing second. The only illumination was provided by a glaring LED light up in the ceiling.

She was a prisoner of war, trapped in a lonely cell.

~~~~~

What a nice place for me to stay, the girl thought. She recalled the cramped and dusty cells she'd passed before, and the hopeless, desperate eyes of those inside staring as she went past.

Ironically, they had a better fate than she did.

Why give me such a clean cell to stay in if I'm really the waste of space you claim I am? She laughed bitterly.

The girl glanced up at the towering walls, but there was no window to look out of. What was the world like outside? She did not know. Maybe it would be better if she didn't, after all.

~~~~~

She remembered the sirens, the bombs, the planes that blocked out the sun when they flew over the town those months ago. She remembered fleeing with the rest of the townspeople, and how they had been stopped by

the strange vehicles that crawled along with spiked wheels. She had been lucky then, slipping away under the sounds of the gunshots.

What happened to the rest, she could only guess.

In the end, she was still too slow.

She was sneaking along the alleys of an alien town, a place she did not know. She had been on the run for a long time, but exactly how long, she had no way of knowing. She rounded a corner and came face to face with another group of those despicable soldiers. She started running away then, a foolish move on her part. The soldiers caught her easily.

"LET ME GO!" she'd yelled, kicking out and struggling every way she could.

People gathered along the sides of the street, and she knew what they were thinking. She was yet another one of the spies from the other side, and she was not going to meet a good end. Not at all.

"We'll bring your mother to you, if you tell us some things about your homeland," the soldiers had said.

~~~~~

She had heard heroic stories from her childhood, stories of war spies who braved every kind of torture. Even so, they did not give up any of their secrets, keeping quiet till the end. But none of those stories, no matter how much they scared her, could compare to the actual feeling. On the first day, she tried to fight back, out of desperation and fear. Of course, it was useless.

Thinking back, she could still hear the whistle of the whip through the air, the sharp pain as it slashed across her back, and her screams as they echoed around

the chamber.

Day after agonizing day, night after deathly night, she only remembered the pain, so much until it became a numb throbbing at the back of her mind. She could no longer feel anything anymore, she was just a soulless creature, a mindless ghoul, a shell of her former self.

The guards talked about it, their loud voices travelling down the silent corridors where darkness and death lingered in every corner. The stupid, stubborn child spy, now reduced to a weeping, dying animal. What a shame, they said. She could put herself out of her misery if she wanted to.

Every day, she was dragged back to her cell with cuts and lashes across her small frame. Every day, she thought she could not go on anymore; death seemed like the best option. Every day, she wondered if it was better that she was killed that time with the other townspeople.

Her torture got worse with each passing day, days she couldn't keep track of anymore. Days solely filled with the same old things. Anger, fear, desperation were things that became her very life source, feelings that powered her.

And they were fading away.

~~~~~

Jerked back into reality, the girl hardly resisted when the guards came in and pushed her out of the room. Head hung low, she focused on keeping one foot in front of another as the soldiers' hollow footsteps resounded against the rock walls.

They led her along dusty, dank corridors, corridors she soon recognized to be those leading to the prison master's office. She was not surprised at all when

they shoved her in, causing her to collapse onto her weak knees. The door clanged shut behind her.

The prison master was a short but imposing man. His white hair was combed into an impossibly neat style, and his mouth was a thin line. His eyes, which were the shade of a dark storm cloud, showed no emotion.

"You again," the girl hissed, gritting her teeth against the biting pain of the chains binding her hands to her back. "I'm sick of seeing you!"

Coldly, the man smiled, hinting amusement at her anger.

"Have you ever thought about what is happening outside?" the man asked, gesturing with his arm. "We are winning the war. Soon, your homeland will be nothing. Tomorrow, at sunrise, our battalions will be marching to your capital. That pathetic city is the last one. I am quite shocked at your leader's foolish bravado. If he had agreed to surrender, he would have spared your countrymen years of suffering and bloodshed."

"Why are you telling me this?" she demanded.

The prison master chuckled. "You are of no more use to us. Your execution will take place tomorrow."

That sentence took a little while to sink in.

~~~~~

Only when she was led back to her cell and the door shut and locked did she allow herself to smile. She was surprised by her own reaction, for she never thought she would ever smile again. Little did the prison master know, his proclamation was like a welcome relief to her.

"Tomorrow," she promised herself. "Tomorrow, I will be free."

~~~~~

The girl sat quietly on the ground, eyes gazing at something far away. If one didn't look carefully, one would have thought her to be a statue.

The room was a blinding white, nothing more than a small, tight cube. The walls seemed to loom over the small figure, seemingly pressing closer and closer with each passing second. The only illumination was provided by a glaring LED light up in the ceiling.

She was a prisoner of war, trapped in a lonely cell.

But her soul was gone, flying into the blue sky, free forever.

Twinkle Twinkle Little Star

Tze Hun Jerald Koh
Singapore
2nd Place Tie

Twinkle Twinkle Little Star

Deep within a nebula, a baby star began to form. The gas in the region collapsed and formed into a star. As it gained mass, hydrogen began to fuse. It lit up brightly, forming a hollow area in the nebula. The remaining gas particles bumped into each other, eventually becoming planets.

The star was young, and curious about the world. Looking around, it only saw a diffuse glow coming from the clouds of gas obscuring its view, and its own half-formed planets. Looking out, the star was struck with a sudden yearning to go out and see the world.

How I Wonder What You Are

When the planets were fully formed, the star set out. Orbiting around it were its planets, their glee evident in their carefree countenance. As they chattered and spun, they always stuck close to their parent, never wandering off. They continued to develop, their fiery surface cooling and hardening as they matured. Their star kept their surfaces warm, and they captured an atmosphere from surrounding gas.

The star left, but not before it said goodbye. It would be allowed to go, the nebula acquiesced, but it had to come back some day. After all, it was only a few million years old, and it had spent so little time with its parent.

Up Above the World So High

The nebula watched contentedly as the planetary system it had nurtured ventured out farther. When planets cleared the hazy boundary of the nebula, it turned its attention inwards, to the hundreds of other developing systems it housed, but kept an eye on the system, watching its progress.

The nebula fretted over its child sometimes, but would always catch sight of the star tracing a path through the heavens high above and relax, the tension seeping out of it as if the star was siphoning it off.

Like a Diamond in the Sky

When the star cleared the nebula, it could only marvel at the clarity and brightness of the other stars just like it, twinkling like jewels on the deep velvet throat of the universe. While the star could only gape at this wonder, the planets had no respect for it, zooming around and playing catch.

As they rotated, even the mischievous planets were struck dumb by the majesty of the nebula behind them. Tall, fluted columns of cloud towered over the nebula, their solid appearance belied an insubstantial reality. Isolated points of light were the only evidence of the blazing nuclear fires that were the beginnings of stars.

Twinkle Twinkle Little Star

A free-floating planet floated in space, reminiscing about the past. It had once been part of a happy binary system, when one of the stars went supernova, scattering the planets and utterly obliterating the other star. It still remembered the shock, the fear, and heat when that happened. That had been terrifying and painful, but nothing compared to the endless cold that followed, leaching the warmth from its core and solidifying it.

As it plodded on its path around the galaxy center, it came across the little star and its planets. It could hardly believe its senses until the light brushed across it, warming its surface. It had got what it wished for ever since it was launched on its current path: to find a new system to call home.

Settling into an orbit around the star, it feared, deep within it, that the star and its system would reject it, sending it on a long, lonely trip again.

How I Wonder What You Are

As they studied the newcomer, the star and its planets wondered where it came from. It was a planet, that much was clear, but where did it come from? What happened to launch it from whence it came?

As they wondered, it spoke up. It told of its old home and the happy times spent there. It told of the supernova and the lonely sojourn that followed. It told, finally, of its joy and happiness at finally finding a new home.

Taking all this in, their decision was unanimous. They would accept it, because it was merely looking for company and warmth after so long alone. They would accept it for a more selfish reason too: It had journeyed for a long while, and some stories would entertain the young star and planets.

With their new companion, the star and its planets continued on their journey.

Different

Sonakshi Nag
Singapore
2nd Place Tie

“Get down!” I shouted upon seeing a black Range Rover pull up outside our house.

Mark quickly crept under the bed and I followed suit.

“It’s going to be fine, Mark. Don’t worry,” I whispered, squeezing the hands of my younger brother.

As we huddled in a corner, miles away from safety, I thought, *Who would’ve thought that we would be living such lives?*

Mark and I had been living in The Capitol for a decade, since it was created. The Capitol was the name of the world left over after World War 7. It was supposed to signify new beginnings, new hope—a place where only peace existed. *Supposed to.* Turns out the government of The Capitol, called the Peacemakers, did not have enough resources to accommodate the whole world. And hence began another war, which left Mark and me separated from our parents. I was only four when I last saw my parents and Mark, just a toddler. But that is only half of our sad story.

Mark and I are different. This realization came alive as I touched the floor and a part of the floor burned into a brown-black colour. You may think that having the power to generate electricity is not so bad, but when the government is hunting down kids with special powers, this works against you. They said they were looking for the “gifted” kids to give them a special home. Reality was they were picking them up to conduct mutation experiments. And on top of that the reward of \$100,000

for finding a “gifted” child did not make our lives easier. We followed ground rules: Keep your head down, make minimal contact and most importantly, never show your powers.

Suddenly, the heavy silence was broken by the crashing of the door as three burly men barged in. Mark tightened his grip on my hand and I shut my eyes. Silence. And then the breaking of glass, followed by the shattering of china into shards of blue and white all over the floor. Rough hands grabbed Mark and me, dragging us out of our hiding spot. *Who were they? Why were they here?* My heart was racing at the thought that they were Peacemakers, here to take us away.

Just then, one of the men pulled out a gun and pointing it at Mark ordered me, “Give me all your money or I’ll blow his brains out!”

Mark tried to free himself but one blow to his face and he dropped to the ground.

“No, please don’t hurt him—I’ll give you everything,” I pleaded. I handed my wallet over to him. “This is all I have,” I lied.

“Oh, really? And what’s that?” The man growled, pointing to the safe. “One more lie and the boy suffers.”

The colour drained from my face. I rushed to the safe, entered the code and opened it, revealing a few family photographs and my parents’ jewelry.

The man blurted, “Get all the jewelry and let’s get out of here.”

His partner nodded and swept all the jewelry into his backpack. “And what about these photos?” he asked.

“Burn them,” the other ordered.

I shuddered at the thought of losing the last memories of our

parents. Mark treasured them dearly as he got to see very little of our parents. As the man flicked the lighter on, I looked at Mark desperately, praying that he would not do anything irrational. The man brought the flame closer to the tip of the photo, and that broke Mark’s dam of patience.

Anger seeping out of Mark, he kicked one of the men and pressed his palm on the other man’s face. A sizzling sound was heard, and the man’s flesh melted into a pile of goop.

“No, Mark, sto—” I tried to call out but it was too late.

Mark snatched the photos and touched the lighter, which melted instantaneously. He then went on to deal with the next man. However, he was too swift for Mark and took out a gleaming, silver rope from his pocket—a *Resistor*. Resistors are capable of subduing powers of gifted people. Almost involuntarily, I punched the man in his face. He was thrown back but quickly got up and pinned me to the ground. Wincing in pain, I stared at him tying up my brother.

The man called his only other living partner, “John, he’s gifted, you what that means?”

John exclaimed, “Richard, we’ve hit jackpot.” He came to me and snarled, “Are you gifted too?”

I lowered my head but before I could speak, Mark defended, “I’m the only one gifted. She’s my god sister. She doesn’t know anything about this.”

I stared at Mark, dumbfounded, tears streaming down my face.

“Then what are we waiting for? Let’s take him to Capitol City!” John exclaimed grabbing Mark and dragging him to their vehicle.

And here I was, sitting on the floor, hoping, praying des-

perately that Mark would not be taken.

No, I couldn't hope anymore. It's time to act, and it's time to act now.

Quickly getting up, I wiped the blood off my mouth and ran towards my bike outside the house. A Snow Falcon, capable of hitting 100 miles an hour in 3.3 seconds. I had never used it before—it was a family heirloom, passed down for generations. As I started the engine, it roared to life, taking off like a tirade, every passing second bringing me closer to Mark.

As I caught up, I glared at Richard driving the black monster, my eyes burning in rage as I overtook him. Confused, Richard slowed down his vehicle, and at that moment I swerved right in front of his car and braked. I quickly got off and started sprinting towards the car. As I drew closer, I could feel rage building through my veins. Soon, little sparks of electricity were coming out of me, ready to incinerate anything around me. My eyes were a flashing white and blue light. Richard turned white and froze. I punched through the window, grabbing his face as electric sparks engulfed his head. He screamed in pain, begging to be released but my hands clasped his face until his shrieks turned into silence. *One down, one more to go.*

Witnessing this, John in a dying attempt to rescue himself, pointed a gun at Mark whispering, "I die, he dies."

"I'm afraid that won't be the case," I replied, smiling as I saw the resistors melting and Mark standing up. A touch on the gun was enough to melt the gun into a trickle of silvery liquid. I zapped John as electricity burst out of me consuming him in its power.

Now, black powder took John's place.

I rushed to my brother and gave him the warmest hug ever. We did not speak for a few minutes—there was not really anything left to say. But when I did see that the bike was gone, I uttered a cry of surprise. What struck us even more was what was in the place of the Snow Falcon—our Family photos. Nobody knew about our family's existence so it was impossible for anybody to get these photos—the only ones left were with us in the safe.

"Angela, isn't that... isn't that Mom's signature on the photo?" Mark asked, a glint in his eyes.

"Yes, it is. They're alive, Mark. And they found us."

Bullied

Naomi Tan Min
Singapore
3rd Place Tie

I took a deep breath, stepping into the school through the rusty blue gates, avoiding eye contact with anyone. It would start soon. As I walked past them, my schoolmates crinkled their noses in disgust and whispered to each other. True enough, I heard it.

“Weirdo!”

“You’re so ugly!”

“You’re a walking germ!

Get away from me!”

“Go back to your planet!”

“No one even likes you!”

I ignored them, tears stinging my eyes. Then, I was pushed to the ground. A jagged rock cut my lip and blood gushed out, staining my white uniform. I looked up and saw a group of students with smirks on their faces. They pulled my bag off me and emptied the contents onto the ground, which was muddied from last night’s thunderstorm. I sat up and watched quietly. The insults started again. Why?

On the ground, I heard a strange beeping sound. I looked up, frightened. The voices of my schoolmates became muffled, just a strange jumble of noises coming from them, their mouths still moving rapidly. Then it stopped entirely. They were frozen, and the beeping sound grew louder, deafening, and I covered my ears. *Help!* I tried to yell, but it was no use. My schoolmates started to blur, ripples appearing across them, and they disappeared.

I sat up, heart pounding, sweating all over. I looked around and heaved a sigh of relief when I saw that I was in my bedroom.

It was just a dream! I thought, a little shaken from my flashback.

In time, I moved on from flashbacks and dreams. I would find incredible insects dancing in the morning, along with pebbles and rocks. I took out my orange drawstring bag and pulled out two jars – one for insects and one for rocks and pebbles. It was hard for others to catch insects, but I had skill. I lay flat on my belly and inched forward, then I rolled side to side. My method worked! I sometimes caught rare ones; I was all set.

No longer a victim, I walked to the front of my house, waiting for the school bus. When the school bus arrived and I walked in, the craziness and chatter stopped, and everyone quieted down, standing and giving up their seats. I examined each and every one of them, then stopped and sucked in my breath. A young boy was on his phone, ignoring me, slouched on his seat. I gritted my teeth.

“I’ll give you to the count of three,” I said.

The boy looked up, finally, and looked at everyone else before resuming his phone call.

“Please, Evelyn, my brother’s just a little kid!” Sarah protested.

“Well, I don’t make exceptions for little kids!” I yelled, and then twirled back to him.

“One,” I yelled, “Two,” I yelled even louder, but he just shook his head, “THREE!” I thundered.

“Matt!” Sarah screamed—

I pulled him up by his collar and wrenched his phone from his hands.

“Listen here, Matt,” I spat, “disobey me, and I’ll make you pay!”

With that, I threw him to the ground and sat on his seat.

Did I feel guilty? No.

I put my bag in my locker and closed it. Crossing my arms and leaning against the locker, I scanned the room for new victims when a scrawny boy with torn clothes walked in with his head bowed, going to the locker beside me. I stared at him, pondering. He noticed my gaze on him and uttered a small, “Hi.”

The perfect victim.

“Hi, I’m Evelyn.” I said, shaking hands with him, “You must be new! Haven’t seen you around here before! I’ll help you with your bag!”

As I took his bag, I poured all of my heavy rocks and pebbles into it.

“See you in class!” I told him, patting his back.

As I did so, I put the cricket in his shirt. I walked away and peeped around the corner, just in time to see him fidget and search all over for the cricket. I smirked. It was successful.

As my victim walked in, he dragged his bag behind him, forehead beaded with sweat. Everyone laughed at his silliness when his bag opened and rocks spilled out. He looked around wildly for the culprit, his eyes resting on me longer than anyone. He had figured it out.

When he sat next to me, his eyes dimmed as he said, “I haven’t quite properly introduced myself, *Evelyn*. I am Max.” He shook my hands hard afterwards, challenging me. Challenge accepted.

Each and every day, I thought of new ways to attack Max. He did nothing. I even cyber bullied him and he asked to meet him under the bridge. I saw him with his bare feet dipping into the cool waters, and we were both

silent, listening to the gentle sloshing of the water until he broke the silence.

“Why do you do it?” he asked.

“I’m experienced – it’s simple,” I replied.

“But, why?” he pursued.

“Why what?” I asked, confused.

“You said you’re experienced, but from what?” he asked.

Suddenly, I understood.

“You’re just doing this so I’ll stop hitting you, but give it up! I won’t!” I snapped.

“No, it’s not that. I just want to know you,” he replied gently.

“Why do you need to know?” I retorted.

“Because I can see the good in you,” he whispered.

“Stop it!” I said, running off before the small part of me that wanted to confess my horrible experience to Max took over.

The next day, I pushed Max to the ground as soon as I saw him.

At the end of the day, I lay on the ground under the bridge, closing my eyes. Suddenly, Max’s words rang in my head. *I can see the good in you. From what experience?* I shook my head to clear my thoughts. *I just need to relax in the water. I thought.* I shook off my shoes and just as I was toeing the water, I lost my footing and fell straight in, gasping for air. I had pushed many people into water before, laughing as I watched them scream helplessly and I now knew what it felt like.

“Help!” I screamed, “HELP!”

Then I paused. *Would anyone help me?*

I screamed, but no one came. I almost gave up on my life when I saw a skinny figure running towards me. I squinted my eyes as it came closer and focused

into view. *Max.* He said nothing, he pulled me up to shore. *Thank you.* I wanted to say, but the words could not form in my mouth. After wrapping me in his jacket, Max searched my face for a message. But I said nothing. He turned, walking away slowly.

“Thank you,” I whispered, “Thank you.”

The next day after school, we were under the bridge again, side by side, but it was not Max who broke the silence.

“Why did you save me?” I asked softly.

“Because it was the right thing to do,” he replied simply.

“But, why didn’t you protest for all my bullying?” I asked.

He turned to me. “Because I could see the pain and fear in your eyes, and I knew you had gone through something far worse than me.” he answered.

“Thank you,” I could finally say. His eyes widened in surprise. I smiled. “For everything – thank you so much,” I continued.

He smiled back. Then we turned to the setting sun, this time, no one breaking the silence. My heart grew twice in size, filled with something I had not once considered.

Gratitude.

Light

Harene Kim
Seoul, South Korea
3rd Place Tie

The fierce rays of the sun hit Sam's face. He felt light-headed. As he continued to run on the tracks, sweat trickled down his broad, muscular back. His loose shirt around his tiny waist clung to his skin, which he swiftly lifted so no one could see his protruding ribs.

Yet he grinned with delight. Such symptoms were usually rewarded with a couple of pounds' drop. If anything, he felt empowered and secure. He savored every moment, but was interrupted when he heard voices in the background say—

"Coach Andrews? My doctor said I can't run because of my asthma."

"No worries, Nil. Sit on the bleachers for now."

Asthma? Sam scoffed, thinking it was one of her pathetic excuses. He recalled that, a few days ago, she missed her English class because of a doctor's appointment. He couldn't see what the big deal was. It wasn't like she had cancer—it was just asthma.

Breathing coarsely, he neared the finish line. A blurry figure approached him, which he recognized to be Jayden. People said he had a lean, attractive figure, but Sam thought he could work on his shoulders.

"Dude, what you did on the tracks was pretty impressive," Jayden complimented.

"Thanks, man," Sam responded nonchalantly, all the while wondering what he was up to.

"You know there's a cross-country practice every Wednesday after school."

"What about it?"

"You should join. We can talk over lunch."

The word lunch stuck out to him, as though Jayden had emphasized it. For most other kids, this would've been a simple yes or no question. But for Sam, this was extremely complicated. Lunch time was his workout time. If he said no, people would start suspecting his eating habits.

"Sure, lunch sounds great" was Sam's response.

After eating a sandwich, his mind was consumed with guilt throughout his afternoon classes. He imagined himself throwing up over and over until he was spitting blood. As soon as the last bell rang, Sam dashed to the school gym. He anxiously stepped on the scale which showed he was a pound heavier. He trembled as if he had accidentally stabbed someone to death. Horrified, he frantically grabbed his diet pills from his locker that read "Feed the muscle, Burn the fat" and dry-swallowed them.

For the next 3 hours, he pounded away on the treadmill and furiously alternated between the cable row, cable press, and deadlift. His legs were shaking in ache and his muscles were sore, but the scale ticked down a pound again. He sighed with relief, but his heart pounded like it was about to burst out of his rib cage. His legs giving up, he finally fell to the floor.

Sam woke up with an excruciating headache to see Jayden and his usual group of friends gathered in the corner of the room. Sam coughed slightly to make his presence known. His friends turned immediately, but they glanced at each other awkwardly not knowing what to say. Their upper lips were raised and their noses grimaced. Jayden broke the ice.

"Sam, are you okay?"

"I guess," he murmured.

"Just eat, you'll be fine."

Those words shot him like a bullet through his heart. He certainly could not imagine anyone say to Nil "Just breathe, you'll be fine." Silence fell and the atmosphere of the room stiffened. The friends he used to jokingly banter with seemed like completely different people. They soon left, saying that they had to go see Nil who was getting surgery for her asthma soon.

He secretly followed his friends to Nil's room, dragging his IV along with him. From outside, he could hear them warmly comforting her, handing her a box of chocolates as well. The room was filled with care and sympathy, not disgust and shock.

He was stunned. If he had suffered from a different disease like cancer, would people have been more sympathetic? Or worse, what if he had never woken up? Would people have shown genuine concern? Apparently, there was an hierarchy of sympathy given to patients with varying diseases—Nil's was on the higher level and his on the lower level. Ironically, his perfect body, resulting from his diet, was the stem of his popularity, but the eating disorder turned out to be the factor that people couldn't stand. He thought back to the days when he was asked to join so many clubs and parties. Everything he had worked for—strict diet, good grades, personality—meant nothing anymore. He didn't want to go back to school where people were so shallow.

Knock, knock

Sam opened the door to find Nil.

"Hey!" Nil said in her usual cheery voice. "Do you mind if I come in?"

"No, not at all. Come in."

She sat cross-legged on the bed. “So, what’s up?”

“Nothing special. Heard you were getting surgery tomorrow. Must be bad.”

“Nah, it’ll be okay. I’m just getting rid of the constant wheezing and coughing,” she paused for a moment and spoke again, “What about you? I heard you collapsed. Who would’ve known? You are an athlete after all.”

“Let’s not talk about it,” he said bluntly.

“Sorry, didn’t know,” she blushed but swiftly changed the subject. “I’m scared about all the make-up assignments and quizzes once I get back to school.”

“At least the teachers were understanding.”

“Yeah, I’m really grateful. Asthma’s hard, but I can’t say it didn’t help me appreciate what I have. My parents, teachers, classmates...everyone provided me with so much support.”

Nil looked like she meant every word of it. Hearing her story made him wonder what would’ve happened if he had a different, more “normal” disease. Then, would he have been less humiliated to open up and seek help? He figured that if he had to choose an illness, it would be a physical one like asthma or cancer.

“I wish I could’ve sought help too,” he blurted out and regretted it the moment the words left his mouth.

“Opening up wasn’t the easiest thing for me either. People thought I was whining, but my conditions were aggravating to the point I was suffocating in my own breath. It was hard to see people think I was turning mentally weak and even crazy.”

“But what was the turning point?” Sam became curious.

“I hated to give in to people’s judgements, so I stood up

for myself. Sure, some continued to be skeptical, but most others were receptive and gave me overwhelming social support.”

Those days he judged her at school flashed back to him—he wished they had never happened. Then he had a frightening thought. All these years, he was the one judging himself, not others. He was too ashamed to accept his disorder, which made him fake to himself and others that nothing was going on. There were so many available resources, from counseling to clinics, but by hiding, he was hindering himself from receiving the help he so desperately needed. While struggling to avoid public stigma, he had been furthering his disorder.

He looked straight into Nil’s eyes, and, for the first time in years, he felt secure. Her eyes reassuringly told him that people were always willing to listen and all he had to do was open up. The burden lifted off his shoulders as he confronted the truth:

“Nil, you’re right. Who would’ve thought I was the one with anorexia?”

She smiled and shrugged her shoulders, “Who would’ve thought?”

Creative Writing ~ Ages 13 – 15

Poetry

First Place

Angelina Gao-Yun Chan
Long Grove, Illinois
Departure

Goh Yi Qing Phylcia
Singapore
The Grand Scale of Things

Jia Jia Liu
Singapore
A Journey to Forever

Second Place

Lara Rui Qi Tan
Singapore
For Forever

Amanda Mandi Zhou
Memphis, Tennessee
Couldn't Help Laughing

Third Place

Sally Seulgi Park
Fairfax, Virginia
May 1st

Chloe Alexandra Kusuma
Singapore
A Treacherous Discovery of the
Landscape
of Self-Love

Emily Shaw
St. Louis, Missouri
Opposites

Stories

First Place

Chere Low
Singapore
Sacrifice

Philip P. Wang
Ellicott City, Maryland
Flying in Another Bird's Wings

Second Place

Jaehoon Jung
Seoul, South Korea
Under the Rubble

Yu Xuan Lee
Singapore
A Found Forever

Krystal Tan
Singapore
Bullets in the Dark

Third Place

Claudia Lim
Singapore
Are We Molded, Do We Become?

Michael Cao
St. Louis, Missouri
Chained By Honor

Nathalie Mitchell
Seattle, Washington
Wang Chung-ing Away

Departure

Angelina Gao-Yun Chan
Long Grove, Illinois
1st Place Tie

An instrument poised
on her shoulder
seems almost invisible
with the melody
emanating from worn wood,

but the sound was
anything but worn, penciling in
a swept impression from another time—

when the bitter passage of the moment
never concerned
us,

when everything was yellow and blue
and even the broken asphalt
seemed a cloud—

when our now-fading haze of the skyline
we were so certain
we could hold,
would be clasped

in an aspirant's
mind,

or there would be a
staircase
we could ascend to see
the universe—and what a universe
it would be!

before it would vanish, the ashes
on a harsh
fluorescent
light—

But how the music fills
every edge
of the labyrinthine pathway,

where too many have
abandoned hopes
along with their footsteps.

I see it through
the silhouettes of dust left behind,

I see it through flickering lights
and graffiti-furnished walls
and the distant rumble of
a broken dream,

I see it through a
subway
violinist,

waiting for a train
that won't ever
depart.

The Grand Scale of Things

Goh Yi Qing Phylcia
Singapore
1st Place Tie

Shimmering stars wink
down at me from miles away,
before shooting off.

Brilliant blazing blurs
bolt across the blue expanse,
over my awed self.

I try to catch them.
Reaching out, barely grasping
their fast fading trails.

A large, pure white pearl,
softly smiles at me, showing
its round, radiant face.

It hangs over me,
silently watching, holding
ions of knowledge.

I try to chase it.
Running on, barely touching
its crafty shadow.

The number of stars:
about two hundred billion,
in our galaxy.

For all the planets:
about a hundred billion,
in our galaxy.

Yet we are just one.
One, on a single planet,
surrounded by stars.

We are so tiny.
We are mere ants to giants,
barely a pin prick.

But like a night star,
whose light shines for us, we too
can brighten a life.

No matter how small,
it makes a difference in
the grand scale of things.

A Journey to Forever

Liu JiaJia
Singapore
1st Place

Once upon a time
there was a boy
whose weapon was his flute
he could make the roses dance
and the clouds weep
just by the sounds he could create
But when he went home
and with much sorrow
he had to put it down
and listen to his parents talk
about how he was to be
a politician by the morrow

He pleaded with them
he begged them
he said, no, I want to be a musician
but they replied, in voices so certain,
“We don’t care what you want
you can decide on your leisure
but we will determine your future.”

Once upon a time
there was a girl
not an ordinary girl, no
She was a strange girl
with strange hair born silver
and strange eyes of different colour
But the thing
she hated most about herself
was that she couldn’t speak
she couldn’t sing
she’d tried round and round
but still couldn’t utter a sound

The worst thing was
she was filled
filled to the brim
with music
with notes and beats and
rhythms and melodies
and so she was
a teapot without a mouth
a queen without a crown
She was the world’s most beautiful flower
that didn’t know how to bloom
She was a rhapsody of harmonies and tunes
all buried in her voiceless tomb of a throat

Whenever she saw
something interesting
music would erupt
like volcanoes
like fireworks
in her mind
but she always found it ironic
that this gift of music
had become more of a curse
with no way of expressing it
And so
she went on
bottling up all of her songs
which were
scattered in the depths of her
like dead leaves on autumn loam
never to be seen
never to be heard

One day
she saw him playing his flute
out on the meadow
the fading sunlight
danced on the silver
like a thousand specks of gold
so entranced was she
by his music
it stirred up what lay
in the deepest parts of her
So he went
and she followed

He taught her
sheet music
He taught her
to read and write
He taught her
how to let out
all that was trapped inside
He taught her
how to love herself

She poured out all of the music in her
which had long fermented
into the richest, strongest wine
which then flowed
out of his silver flute
like the sweetest honey
which managed to soften
even the stone hearts
of his parents
who let them be
who they wanted to be
who let them do
what they wanted to do

They danced
they were a pair of butterflies
fluttering on the wind
They sang
they were two nightingales
perched on a moonlit branch
And it didn't matter
whether they sang it out loud
or in their heads
as long as
they both felt
the beauty of music
and what they shared
between them

He said, "Come, my friend, come
on an adventure
a quest
a journey
where birds can sing in the waves
and fish can touch the blue skies
where we can trust what we believe
and there is no limit to what we can achieve
where nothing is impossible
and everything is probable
Where we can ask
and the world will answer
So come with me
on a journey to forever."

She wrote, "Come, my friend, come
on an adventure
a quest
a journey
where the clouds rain drops of honey
and the eagles cry tears of gold
where we can trust what we believe
and there is no limit to what we can achieve
where nothing is impossible
and everything is probable
Where we can ask
and the world will answer
So come with me
on a journey to forever."

So they went on a journey
where there were unlimited possibilities
and infinite probabilities
Where they can trust what they believe
and there is no limit to what they can achieve
Where they can ask
and the world will answer
And thus began
their journey to forever.

For Forever

Lara Rui Qi Tan
Singapore
2nd Place Tie

so this journey across the rainbow starts
with us having stars in our eyes,
because we are supposed to take
advantage of the fact that we are young and unafraid, but deep down inside
we know our blood is slowing to a halt
in our flower-pressed veins, our voices drain to a funereal chant and
our tears drain away into the baptismal
fonts.

see, this is the terror of being
young, of jumping onto whale fins and
riding on the backs of ocean cryptids
away into the morning light,
we are constantly fighting for days
of sun-kissed perfection, we want to learn
how to unpick these time-thickened
callouses and change our heartstrings,
until we become moth-bitten and
gray-haired.

until we lose ourselves in this vortex of calamity,
crash-burning into disaster, dissolving between the sutures like
shadow-sprites, daydream soft and cirrus light, we forget
that we are humans too.

this is the journey to
forever, survival of the fittest, race to infinity where we are on this odyssey
to see who can live the most, fly the highest and
smile until our cheeks blister. i am still
peeling the ocean waves apart and
emptying the water basins to see if you
exist between these empty spaces and
molecule-crowds, we are lost and aching
to write each other into morning eyes.

it seems like we can go on for forever
this way and let the world pass by like we're on
carnival carousels and holding each
other's sticky-sweet hands covered in
caramel and crumbled existences,
fading away into questions that tug on our wrists like
balloons soaring into ether.

wondering how the world might look like from this high.

[No Title]

Amanda Zhou
Memphis, Tennessee
2nd Place Tie

moonlight pours in the kitchen like a huge wave of water
surprised by the hit, I look up at the sky
and see
the last of the clouds had scurried on away
and now we have the night to ourselves

we take out our extensive set of materials
I drop a pot
silence fills the air
my eyes make their way up to my grandmother's

it hits

laughter erupts between us
fills the empty rooms

I make an effort to remember it all
every word she says
every laugh we share

then our environment strains to pull us back to reality
the clock jumps out seemingly to yell *it's half past midnight are you out
of your minds??*

seriousness comes back to our faces and we start

spread, dip, smooth, layer

I spread the dumpling skin
dip my fingers in the cloudy water
smooth the water with flour on the borders of the skin
and layer it with the delicately made

dumpling after dumpling, we finally stand triumphant
admiring the plate of the fresh feast

everyone can make dumplings
but the kind we make
are only by us
the tradition passed down
generation after generation
and always taught at the age of seven

every move perfected taking centuries

I silently beg my grandmother with my eyes
if I could boil one on the spot
and silent the rumbling of my stomach

she disapproves giving me a harsh, yet gentle look as if to reprimand
while she closes her eyes
and nods her head

I have to wait
get a good night's sleep
because tomorrow my whole family
will be the ones to eat

May 1st

Sally Park
Fairfax, Virginia
3rd Place Tie

May 1st was the day
the grass was coated with
a fresh layer of morning dew

May 1st was the day
the sun peeked from the horizons,
projecting a subtle golden glow of light
by my bedroom window

I remember it as vivid as ever....

Yesterday's frost lingered in the air
and by every gust of wind
a scent of spring curled beneath my nostrils

With a day this beautiful-
how could I have known
that something so tragic
would happen?

The innocence of that single day-
I thought nothing could go wrong,
because you were with me,
and I was with you.

May 1st was when it happened.
The fire.
You.

Chaos in my chest
beating a single rhythm.
There was no melody in me.
"There was no way-
he was trapped."
They tried to explain to me

“We tried our best.”
Those words rang out the most.
But their best
resulted in your death.

You burned-
 with part of me
 with the house I called my home
 with everything I ever learned to love

After the accident,
 I walked to our charred house
 (or what was left of it).

Ashes of the house and you scattered around
I crawled towards the dusty remains-
 (knees bent down and
 fists clenched) –
 and threw them into the air

Loathing the fire with a burning hatred
I closed my eyes,
but all I could see was
the dancing fire
that devoured you.

My eyes burned
I’m out of breath
as I screamed

Right there.
Right then.

I shrieked
and laughed to myself
in horror

Eyes widened
I was a menace.

a treacherous discovery of the landscape of self-love

Chloe Alexandra Kusuma
Singapore
3rd Place Tie

The landscape is slightly hazy
mystery hovering above
a world of unknown

Her heart is filled with longing
wolves howling and prowling within her
butterflies awaiting their release

But here she remained
as if she were strapped onto a chair
with steel walls towering high above her
separating her in a misty world of confusion and anxiety

She watched as overconfident cabs dashed down the road
men in ivory suits strode confidently across the streets with their cellphones glued
to their ears children galloped joyously on the sidewalk
she watched in silence
eyes wandering around in this unfamiliar world
where everyone seemed confident and happy
with themselves

For her there was much to explore
in a world
where there is no fear
in letting every man in the cosmos
delight in her sight
in letting every meteorite attempt to knock her down
but fail
in letting all the stars
shine and illuminate her

Except
the thought itself
only *crippled* her
only *paralyzed* her

She thought
who would be captivated by a girl
who looked like a scene of total destruction?
or at least that was how *she felt*

She felt as if
she was stuck in a realm of perpetual darkness
her zeal dwelling in black clouds

What she needed
was a release
Oh, if only she could

The only issue was
what if people did still judge her
criticize her
try to change her
she thought
was it really worth a shot?

She withdrew from her bedroom
and decided to go outside to the nearby park
to get some fresh air
but the air didn't feel any different - the same stagnant air

The stale air suffocated her
an air of resentment
resentment at being stuck in this state of mind
that disallowed her from being her true self
believing in herself and being truly happy

What she needed
was to discover
self-love

That would be the key to her escape
love for herself
her natural beauty
the way her nose wiggled when she was elated
the way her hair flowed shyly in the wind
the way her mouth curved up when she was amused
everything
about *her self*

The trepidation that had her heart chained up
lightened
and despite her initial reluctance
she decided to dive into the deep pool of mystery
hope
and happiness

The chains broke apart

And that was when
an unfamiliar feeling within her
cleared up the fog
just like a wind
and she could finally see
a new life before her

A smell that was fragrant
hit her almost immediately

A new landscape had been formed before her

A plain filled with sunflowers
nodding at her with acknowledgement

The air
saturated with droplets of pride, confidence, happiness
in her self
or in other words - *self-love*

This was the change she had needed all along
a new reality
a new landscape
a new-found love for herself

Maybe they were right
when they said that
"loving ourselves works miracles in our lives"

Opposites

Emily Shaw
St. Louis, Missouri
3rd Place Tie

You're so planted to the ground,
While I'm up among the clouds.
You're so straightforward,
While I'm floating through space.
You're so in-the-moment,
While I'm lost in a dream.
You're so down-to-earth,
While I'm up in the stars.

Take me to the base of the canyon,
And I'll take you to the sky.
Take me to the core of the earth,
And I'll take you to Mars.
Take me to the bottom of the abyss,
And I'll take you to the stars.
Take me to the deep ocean sea,
And I'll take you to the moon.

Show me reality,
And I'll show you imagination.
Show me truth,
And I'll show you hope.
Show me time,
And I'll show you infinity.
Show me focus,
And I'll show you dreams.

Sacrifice

Chere Low
Singapore
1st Place Tie

Who would have thought a stranger would have given up his life for boys buried deep in the bowels of the earth, with a mouth of impenetrable darkness? Who would have thought that a navy seal would brave the turbid waters - a literal stab in the dark - to bring oxygen to a group of teens who were now malnourished and traumatised, trapped in an ovoid-shaped air pocket?

It is funny how quiet it is underwater.

The viscosity has a way of blocking every sound out. The silence is deafening, a stark contrast with the endless chirps he hears when he first enters the dank cavern, thousands of bat roosts hidden behind stalactites. The diver literally enters another world, another universe where he has been robbed of his sense of sight, and most importantly, the ability to breathe freely. Each breath is deliberate, precious. He realizes now how much he had taken for granted the ease of a deep inhale above the surface, with the sun shining mercilessly on his sweat-soaked back, and the hum of insects in the jungle air. He realizes that the only way to estimate his life span is the oxygen gauge hanging by his side.

It brings him back to the first time he had ever dived, in a turquoise cocktail pool at a resort with colourful corals and schools of bright-hued fish water. The freedom had been intoxicating and his career choice had been decided then, when he kicked with his flippered feet and air bubbles escaped his mouth bobbing to the

surface. In contrast, this water is not crystal clear, far from it and he cannot even make out the cone shaped stalagmites on the cave floor his flippers occasionally brush against.

Down here, deep in the brown water - all that accompanies him is a dangerous tranquility.

All he is aware of is the purposeful inhale and exhale of his breath, and the timorous beating of his heart. The water is murky and there is almost no visibility, but the diver stays true to his course. He is acutely aware that this is almost an impossible task - to navigate through a labyrinth of tunnels, underwater channels, and then guide the boys - one by one, through the murky waters and back to safety.

Yet, this is a sacrifice that he must make.

Be still. Be brave. Be bold - the diver tells himself. He tries not to think of his buddy that perished the day before when his tank ran out of oxygen. He can only imagine how his colleague must have felt - trapped in the dark recesses of the cave, gasping desperately for air that was not there, thrashing helplessly as his lungs screamed for a breath of blessed oxygen, and then slowly losing his battle to oblivion.

He tries to push that thought out of his mind and make his way forward in the darkness.

He makes his way through the labyrinth of caves - the only light that illuminates his way is the torch he holds in his left hand - the right is to feel for the edge and ridges of the cave. He cannot see behind him or in front of him. He is surrounded by inky blackness, enveloped by it.

And yet, he must go on - he has to. He has taken an oath

to protect and serve. His own son would be about the age of the youngest boy, and even though he knows this may be the ultimate sacrifice, he understands a father's pain.

It is darker now, darker than he had ever imagined it to be. His oxygen gauge is precariously low and he tries not to look at it too often in case it triggers a panic attack - one that would waste more oxygen.

It is darker now than it has ever been, and the silence is overwhelming.

But he must go on - he will go on. With a last effort of will he pushes himself against the edge of the cave, feeling the stone through his rubber suit.

For a moment, he feels a blissful weightlessness that only divers and astronauts are privy to - and then suddenly, as if by magic, he hears the excited cries of a gaggle of boys.

"They are here! They are here! We are safe!" He hears their voices before he sees them but instinctively recognises the genuine joy and excitement in their voices. It is the happiness of a child on Christmas Day when he opens a present.

With a deep exhale, he breaks the surface of the debris-filled water, and reaches out for eager hands.

They are found.

Flying in Another Bird's Wings

Philip Wang
Ellicott City, Maryland
1st Place Tie

Who would've thought that particular F would be better than any A?

I remember meeting Mr. Woodsworth on the first day of high school. While other students sat solemnly at their desks, I was exhilarated to begin. English was my forte; ever since my second birthday, my mother has fed me Plato's *Republic* for breakfast and Austen's *Emma* for dinner.

I was raised to be the next Shakespeare.

I glanced at the teacher sitting at his desk. He was a tall, lanky man wearing a white t-shirt, his bald spot beginning to form amidst his sea of graying hairs. He was sipping McDonald's coffee.

Tasteless, I thought.

The teacher began to speak.

"Hello class, my name is Mr. Woodsworth, and I'm your English 9 GT teacher. Now, that GT in the title of this class doesn't stand for garbage truck, it stands for gifted and talented, so I will hold you to those standards."

I rolled my eyes discreetly. At Golden Valley High, everyone was "gifted and talented." This guy was just giving the run-of-the-mill spiel. Suddenly, Mr. Woodsworth paused. He strolled across the room through the neat lines of desks. He stopped in front of me.

"What's your name?"

I looked up.

"Paul Robinson."

Mr. Woodsworth placed his hand on my right shoulder.

"Mr. Robinson, are you bored?"

"A little," I replied.

"Please explain."

I smiled.

"We've heard the same speech in every single class today."

Mr. Woodsworth kept his hand on my shoulder.

"I understand, but a philosopher once said, 'We are what we repeatedly do. Excellence is not--'"

"--not an act, but a habit.'" I finished. "*Aristotle. Nicomachean Ethics.*"

I awaited a wave of astonishment and approbation. Mr. Woodsworth continued to retain the face of a gargoyle.

"That's correct," he said. "But do you really understand those words?"

I nodded, still anticipating the compliment about my literary expertise. It never came.

I didn't listen to anything else he said that day. I was determined to have him acknowledge me, tell me that I was another Emerson.

When I walked into class the following day, Mr. Woodsworth was scribbling *To Kill A Mockingbird* on the blackboard.

“Class, today we will begin reading an American classic, a story of injustice through the eyes of two children. Throughout our reading, I hope that you grow by seeing yourself in others.”

“But Mr. Woodsworth, what if you’ve already read the novel?” I blurted out.

Mr. Woodsworth smiled nonchalantly.

“Mr. Robinson, an additional read is both beneficial for your own comprehension and for the essay you’ll construct based on Scout’s maturation process.”

This was it. My essay was going to be a masterpiece so sensational that he would have no choice but to acknowledge my genius. But Scout’s... irksome. Instead, I was much more interested in Atticus Finch.

I began to formulate my battle plan. Soon enough, I had produced my magnum opus: a collection of my insights focusing on Atticus Finch’s monumental line, “You never really understand a person until you consider things from his point of view...until you climb in his skin and walk around in it.” By the due date of the essay, I felt more prepared than Fischer against Spassky in the 1972 World Chess Championship.

I continued to beam with confidence for weeks after I turned in the essay until one day when I checked my English grades online. My face turned a grotesque white. An F glared back at me with the following comments: “Did not follow the prompt or understand the themes in his own writing.”

I knew I ignored the prompt, but how could he have said that I didn’t understand my own writing?

Mr. Woodsworth was a silver-tongued snake.

The following day, I dragged my feet through the hallway, trying to delay entering Mr. Woodsworth’s classroom. Habitually, I was always first, but that day, I was dead last.

As I walked in, I saw that the arrangement of desks was quite peculiar: they were in islands of four, where one of them would face the back of the classroom. My eyes searched wildly for a vacant seat, only to discover that all but one desk was taken: the one at the front of the room that faced the rest of the class, the one closest to Mr. Woodsworth. Sluggishly, I slid in with a grief-stricken face. I could feel the heat of Mr. Woodsworth’s breath and practically taste the stink of his cologne. A barrage of irate tears welled up inside me.

Then, something phenomenal happened, nothing short of a Jesus-Raises-Lazarus-from-the-Dead miracle.

As Mr. Woodsworth began to call on students to answer questions, I discovered that from my position, I could perceive the emotions behind each face; I could see everything Mr. Woodsworth could see, hear everything Mr. Woodsworth could hear, feel everything Mr. Woodsworth could feel. I could think Mr. Woodsworth’s next word before he even spoke it.

For the first time in my life, I had genuinely crawled into the skin of someone else; I subconsciously began to imagine myself as Mr. Woodsworth.

I was wearing Mr. Woodsworth's cheap cologne and drinking the same McDonald's coffee (you don't earn very much from being a high school teacher). I spent hours trying to enlighten a group of disinterested students. My one desire was for them to learn.

As I traveled back in time in his body to the first day of school, I suddenly saw an arrogant child roll his eyes at me. He was making a public mockery of me; yet, as I watched him smirk, I felt no animosity towards the boy, only pity. I pitied that he couldn't understand the extent of his own ignorance, and I felt the need as his teacher to impart to him the lesson of humility.

I came back to the present. It wasn't a pleasant feeling to realize how erroneous my actions were, especially when used to be self-righteous. I wanted to continue being angry at Mr. Woodsworth, but all I could think of was what to say in atonement to him.

The bell rang. I waited for the rest of the class to leave before I walked up to Mr. Woodsworth.

"Yes?" He smiled at me, this time with a little more warmth.

I stared at the ground.

"I just wanted to apologize to you for my arrogant behavior."

Mr. Woodsworth placed his hand on my shoulder once again and looked into my eyes.

"You like Aristotle, right? In his *Politics*, he wrote that 'learning is not child's play; we cannot learn without pain.' I can envision the pain you felt when you saw that F. However, you must see beyond the numbers. In exchange for an F, you've learned to stand in another's shoes, to be humble, to have empathy, to know that there is always more to know. That's a favorable trade, isn't it?"

My eyes remained on the ground.

"I guess, but could I redo the assignment?"

Mr. Woodsworth laughed.

"You know, you remind me of someone I used to know. Oh, he thought he could tame three wild mustangs with one hand tied behind his back and rule the universe."

"Did he ever do those things?" I jested.

"Well, if arrogant students account for the mustangs and the universe is our classroom, then I think he's done both."

Two bright, unshed drops formed in my eyes.

"Thanks, Mr. Woodsworth."

He nodded, and I headed for the door. At the last minute, I turned back.

"Never mind, I'll keep my F."

Under the Rubble

Jaehoon Jung
Seoul, South Korea
2nd Place Tie

8:42 AM

Genelle POV

The silence in the Port Authority was shattered by a sudden ear-splitting crash as a large commercial airline rammed into the side of the building. Genelle was blasted back into reality by a scorching wave of heat but it wasn't until her desk caught on fire that she stumbled out of her cubicle. Genelle looked up to see the enormous nose of an airline plane looming over her.

"What on earth..." she muttered and cautiously edged towards the nose of the plane lodged in the wall, squinting to look into the cockpit window.

A scrawny, eastern Asian man lay at the pilot seat with a thick streak of blood running down his head. A long iron rod impaled in his chest was clearly visible where blood streamed out. Still clasped in his bloody hand was a crumpled photograph. Genelle was about to knock on the cockpit window when the building rattled vigorously, uprooting the plane from the wall. The floor tilted forward as the plane made its descent towards the ground. Genelle looked around and noticed that almost everyone had fled during the initial impact, leaving three trembling people on the floor including her coworker Rosa.

"You still think we should stay here?" Rosa said.

"Staircase is that way Rosa, not that way! You want to go, then you have to go now!"

Genelle pointed at the doorway. She sprinted down the

stairs until her lungs felt like they were on fire. Panting, she glanced up at the sign which read "30th Floor Meeting Rooms 1". She collapsed near the wall, catching deep breaths. Rosa was already there, lying on the floor, gasping for air. Genelle fumbled for her cell phone and dialed her husband, Roger. The phone rang for several minutes before Roger's familiar voice cheerfully blabbered, "Hi its Roger, I'm not on my phone right now but leave me a message!"

Genelle asked, "Hey Rosa, have you tried calling anyone?"

Rosa grimaced and muttered, "Reception's down and this is a new phone."

Genelle cursed under her breath and turned her phone off.

"We should just stay here and---".

Genelle was in mid-sentence when the building shuddered yet again, this time knocking the two a few feet in the air. Rosa screamed and covered her ears as the structure wobbled forward with a violent jerk sending Genelle tumbling down the stairs. The ground split open with an almighty crack and Rosa's hand slipped out of reach. All around Genelle, walls burst inward and slabs of concrete crashed down. For a split second, she saw Rosa's terrified eyes before the world faded to oblivion.

8:42 AM

James POV

Officer James Symington had just finished his morning patrol and was grabbing a coffee at the corner of Chamber Street when a blast echoed across the entire district.

"We have a 10-71 officer Symington, report to the Trade Center nearby," shouted the police radio.

"Roger that command, on my way OVER," James replied.

James thought there would be a riot there or a couple of thugs.

When he saw the smoldering sky, he exclaimed "Mother of God. What happened here?"

James was too shocked to realize he had crashed into a parked minivan. James stumbled out of the smoking car and walked in the direction of a fireman stationed nearby.

"What on earth happened?" James asked.

"Terrorists ordered a plane strike here. There's still hundreds of people up there." the fireman grunted.

"Please! Let me in! I'm Search and Rescue!" James urged the fireman.

"Sorry, I have my orders. Not allowed to start search operations yet," the fireman drawled.

James was about to protest when the top half of the building crumbled towards the square. James ducked under his car as a colossal wave of dust and rocks dispersed across the street like a raging typhoon. When the screams and moans ceased, he looked up and squinted towards the rubble to see a devastated landscape littered with corpses. James looked to his right and noticed the battered remains of the fireman atop a mound of concrete. He picked up the fireman's gas mask before sprinting through the barricade.

11:56 AM

Genelle POV

Genelle's ears were ringing excruciatingly when she woke up. She tried to budge her arm but felt a raw jolt of pain oscillate across it. She pulled at her left foot stuck under a pipe until she

saw the mangled corpse of Rosa. Although her face was heavily disfigured, her shocked expression was clearly visible. Genelle choked and forced herself not to throw up. The temperature was low and the metal beams that pinned down her legs weren't helping. Genelle's teeth chattered as she clasped her hands to try to stay warm. She felt as if she was on the verge of blacking out when a hand wrapped around hers. Its firm but gentle grip pulled her up out of the rocks she was under. Genelle felt warm light shine on her before she passed out.

11:56 AM

James POV

James saw a wriggling hand sticking out of the rubble. Upon contact, the fingers twitched before dropping down again. James desperately picked off the chunks of rock uncovering a middle-aged man lying in the rubble with his eyes closed. He pressed his ears to the man's chest but was met with silence. James sighed and started picking off more rocks in the seemingly endless pile of rubble. This was only his second corpse but James was already succumbing to the deadly effects of nausea. He heard a deafening crunch above his head and dragged the body aside as a giant slab of rock rammed down in front of him.

James's search and rescue dog started to whine and tugged on her leash, beckoning him to follow. She trotted to the other side of the pile of rubble and whined again. James tore out some beams and concrete until he saw a bruised hand. He clutched it and felt the wrist feeling relief flood him when he noticed a weak pulse. James plucked out several

more rocks until he saw a woman lying in the rubble, taking ragged, uneven breaths.

"Stretcher team!!!" James yelled.

James gingerly held the woman in his arms and trekked back out of the mountain of rubble he was in. As he finally felt the sunlight warm his skin, he blacked out.

10 years later

Genelle strolled down the streets of Lower Manhattan, sipping a cup of black coffee. She passed by a local police precinct when she bumped into a stocky man. He was wearing a police lieutenant uniform and had the name "Symington" printed in gold on his breast pocket. Although the years had been harsh to him, his face bore a resemblance to the man that had saved many lives 10 years ago.

Genelle turned back and said, "Excuse me? Officer?"

The lieutenant turned back and looked at Genelle. His face was blank for a few seconds but soon, they both broke into a smile.

A Found Forever

Yu Xuan Lee
Singapore
2nd Place Tie

Distracted, the old man kept counting the number of lines on her face. On and on he counted, one two three — until he lost count and started fresh from one. His forgetfulness was getting more apparent with old age, he realised, as he lost count again. But he never wanted to forget his wife's face, the angry lines that once formed proud eyes, stubborn jaw. Feeling the weight of his gaze upon her graying brow, she looked up. Her eyes were miserable as they stared into his. She didn't look anything like the woman he'd fallen in love with. But he had promised himself to her, no matter how she looked, and he was a man of his word. She blames herself, he realised with a start.

"Millie," he started, and his tentative tongue quivered.

The word pulsed through the cosy living room where the two of them sat staring at each other, him with yesterday's newspaper on his lap, and a half-unknitted small pink woolly hat on hers. Neither one spoke. The old man's heart broke as he watched Millie tear the seams of the tiny crochet-knitted hat, helpless. It had a tiny rose-pink faux wool ball sewn at the very top. He knew Millie had poured her heart and soul into weaving it — he had seen her hunched over in the armchair, brown fingers moving like twigs in wind. *Our child could wear this in winter*, Millie had said with a fond smile, so her ears (shell-shaped, like Millie's) would not freeze when she was out in the snow. It would be Millie and he and their daughter—snowflakes falling all

around them, three woolly winter hats on their hairy heads, purple, blue, pink—marveling at first snow together, sled in hand.

It would be their *forever*.
Except there was no daughter.

She was in Millie yesterday, the old man remembered, her little tiny body barely formed. The old man talked to her through Millie's skin, and it throbbed in reply. It was a funny sight — a small belly jumping at knock-knock jokes.

They couldn't wait for their *forever*, together.

But now it was gone.

A peal of childish laughter echoed outside the small window above the sink, and the old man caught the flash of pain across Millie's features before it faded. It was like this now, both of them, in denial—*no reminders of our pain, please and thank you*. A husband and his wife, childless, useless. The thought was scary.

"Do you think ..." Millie wondered aloud, voice tired, and the old man snapped his head up to look at her.

It was the first time she'd spoken that day.

"Do you think, that after *her*, we would love another child just as much?"

The old man shrugged, but the voice in his head told him no. How could they? Their little girl had left before she had even come. Millie and the old man did not even have a sepia-dressed photograph of her to remember. Their little girl was just a memory of what could have been a lifetime of *forever*.

"It's not your fault," he said, because both of them had fallen silent again, and the silence was unnerving and unnatural.

Millie's eyes widened and her head hung like a hook. The old man watched tears drip on the

accursed hat and realised far too late that he had said the wrong thing. There used to be no "wrong things" between them, but everything seemed wrong now. How had so much changed in a day?

"Millie, sorry," was halfway out of his mouth, but Millie saw the rushed syllables rolling on his tongue and stopped him before he could speak.

The silent words between them tickled his skin.

A blur of cashmere smudged across the window, and then the door flung open. Startled, Millie looked up, furiously rubbing at her tears.

There was a *little girl*.

The old man watched his wife's face carefully, hooking onto her sharp intake of breath, her painful swallow. When he released a breath that he didn't know he was holding, he felt his breaths come like *huff puff huff puff* —

But the girl was blissfully unaware, small in her big pullover that covered her knees, a single stalk of mistletoe clutched in her sweater paws. She stumbled a little over her oversized snow boots as she tottered up to the old couple. And, *oh my god* — jammed on her golden hair was a small, pink hat, wet with snow.

He knew the moment Millie saw it, caught her muffled choked sob, watched her hastily stuff the twin hat on her lap into her coat pocket.

"Hello," the small girl said, peering up at them. "You look kind of sad," she continued, earnest gaze fixed on Millie. "Have this little mistletoe. Mama gives them to all the neighbours."

The little girl blinked slowly, holding out the small stalk of mistletoe, looking most ridiculous but endearing in her huge pullover. When Millie didn't move, the little girl trotted forward and stuffed the

mistletoe in Millie's coat pocket anyway. Millie stiffened at the little girl's touch, a ghost, a ghost, she mouthed, and stared straight at the old man. But he shook his head. *No, Millie, we don't have a daughter, not anymore, I know it breaks your heart* —

"I'm Jodie," the little girl said, ignorant and climbing up the stool in the centre of the room so that now she stood taller than both of them. "Mama's the florist who lives across the street, and she pins daisies in my hair on Sundays."

She then plopped down on the stool, thinking aloud.

"You two seem awfully quiet for a loving couple."

You talk a lot, the old man thought, bewildered. Too many words for a too small girl. He almost laughed at that.

Millie coughed, blinking furiously.

"I'm sorry, Jodie, excuse us. But we just lost...someone."

She looked at the little girl, looked down, looked at her again.

"I apologize if we seem a little distant. She meant a lot to us."

Jodie's face twisted. Her eyes were sincere and sweet.

She propped her head on her stick-thin wrist and said, "Tell me about her," and then, "tell me what kind of jokes she liked to hear."

Millie's eyes widened, but the old man laughed. He could not help it. A raw, unexpected laugh burbled like a brook in his throat and wriggled its way out. He laughed at Jodie's earnest attitude, at the mortified look on Millie's face.

"She liked knock-knock jokes," he said simply.

Jodie chewed at her nails and replied, "She sounds like someone I would love to know."

Millie had a small smile now.

"She is," she supposed.

The old man watched her reach for her coat pocket, tearing the last pink string that held the hat together and tying a knot on the stalk of mistletoe.

"She is, Jodie," she repeated, and held the mistletoe to her heart, smiling a bigger smile.

And in the cosy living room, old woman and man and little girl sat for hours, on armchair and wooden stool, sharing their favourite knock-knock jokes until the clock on the mantelpiece struck six in the evening. Then Jodie promised to come back the next day, and the next, and the next.

"Forever," she promised, pausing, "and next winter, I might even bring my sled."

Millie and the old man smiled. It was the first step on the journey to forever.

Bullets in the Dark

Krystal Tan
Singapore
2nd Place Tie

It seemed like a typical night in good old London. Dull-colored buildings neatly organized around the street, reflecting the light only from the few streetlamps peppering the sidewalks. The usual musty scent that hung around the buildings was gone. The pathways, as always, were spotless. Even the rowdy crowds that used to hang around the streets at night were home for Christmas Eve. Everything felt perfect.

The sky seemed to agree. Dispersed across the navy-blue sky was a mass of stars glistening radiantly. There was not a wisp of cloud in sight. A cool breeze blew past the bare streets, causing some flyers put up around the street to flutter, emitting rustling noises.

It was a cool and peaceful evening.

The streets became vacant no more when a man walked out of a jewelry shop and occupied it. He looked middle-aged with a face lined with wrinkles and a stiff walking gait. He probably worked too hard to sustain his family. He donned a simple but worn out trench coat with slightly rugged pants, and to top it all off, a top hat. Interestingly, there was a red feather in his hat. He was not your stereotypical old Englishman.

In his hands was a small red paper bag with a green streak down the bag, a perfect color combination for the day before Christmas. He flashed a quick glance at his watch and quickened his pace.

"I ought to hurry home. Mary would love this necklace!"

A gust of wind suddenly breezed past Mr. Benson, causing chills to travel down his spine. He shuddered nervously.

"It feels like I am being followed..."

He shook off the thought and carried on walking, ignoring the chills he felt.

"Now is the perfect timing. I must not get this wrong." A soft whisper, barely heard over the sound of the rustling posters, faded into the night.

A silhouette, hidden by the towering shadows of the building, came into sight. Not into the sight of Mr. Benson, however.

"It's time to say goodnight, Mr. Benson."

A smirk appeared on her face. Load. Lock. Fire. Extract. Eject. Unlike most English people, these were the rules that she lived by.

Just at the corner where Mr. Benson was about to turn, there stood a streetlamp. It was not an ordinary streetlamp. Usually, the light flickered on and off at random times. Tonight, however, it flickered in a monotonous pattern.

The sinister pulsation of the street lamp leered ominously above the pavement.

The light flickered once. She positioned herself.

The light flickered twice. She aimed.

The light flickered thrice. She pulled.

She pulled the trigger of a gun.

Bang. That was the sound produced by a gunshot fired at a person.

Thud. That was the sound made by a person, probably dead, falling onto the sidewalk.

Crackle. That was the sound made by the flickering lamp post, that would no longer emit light.

Those three sounds were made that night.

For now, everything became silent.

The once perfect evening had been shattered. It seemed like a pitch-black curtain had been draped over the sky, and the once beautiful and bright stars were made into twisted, warped shapes by the ominous clouds covering the sky. The cool breeze had turned into a violent wind circling around the streets. It was far from perfect.

Now, we take a look at Mr. Benson, whose heart has stopped beating. The bullet that tore through the wind landed squarely on his chest, fitted snugly in the pocket of his coat. He looked the same as before, except that his coat pocket was slowly turning a brownish red, and his eyes were wide open, looking shell-shocked.

The red and green bag was situated dismally on the pavement. The contents of the bag had spilled out. Lying despondently on the cold, unforgiving pavement was a beautiful diamond necklace. Well, once beautiful. Like beautiful sakura flowers that shriveled up in the autumn, or beautiful women turning old, the diamond necklace was adorned with cracks spreading around it, making it look like a spider's web. Mr. Benson had hoped to gift the once beautiful diamond to his wife, and improve their crumbling relationship.

Little did he know three seconds earlier that he would see his wife no more.

One of the posters was ripped from the wall by the fast-moving wind and landed beside the now dead Mr. Benson. On the poster was a picture of a silhouette with a white question mark on top of it. The large letters bolded in black and capitalized, **WANTED**, was embossed on the top of the poster. A reward was also stated in the poster. However, that was not the thing that was important. The most jarring thing was stated in the next sentence. It contained these four words, four words that were not heeded by Mr. Benson: Beware the Silent Reaper.

Are We Molded, Do We Become?

Claudia Lim
Singapore
3rd Place Tie

Thank you for attending the annual address of the Mayo clinic, fellow colleagues, and soon to be inducted colleagues. I am Doctor Lisa Li, and I am greatly humbled to have received the honor of succeeding Doctor Alexis as head of the Department of Surgery. To thank Doctor Alexis for her two decades of service, I would like to share a story about the both of us, a testament to her as a mentor and friend.

Doctor Lisa Li stared down at a slumbering patient, his features contorted in silent agony, and cursed the crossroads of life that had led her to this very moment. Her fingers nimbly checked for the man's pulse, fished out her stethoscope, checked his drug dosage, as her thoughts swarmed and gathered like a cloud of locusts in her head. The voice that cut through her thoughts was cool and cultured.

"I'd have thought you better than to be performing your duties absentmindedly."

The gentle chiding, it left Lisa feeling like she had been flayed alive by guilt. Brown eyes darted up to meet grey eyes that were knowing and filled with warmth.

Alexis. Supervisor, mentor, friend. Head surgeon of the prestigious Mayo clinic for 20 years running. She was a living legend, and not a day went by in the past five years of Lisa's life when she did not feel grateful to Alexis.

"You're agonizing over something. A crucial decision, perhaps?"

Sunlight had glanced off tinted windows as a man slid a

piece of paper across the wooden table to Lisa. An invitation to be the private doctor to a man near the top of the Forbes most influential men was a ticket to becoming the most sought after doctor in the world, at the raw age of 20.

There was one thing keeping her from signing her name with a flourish on the dotted line. Her interview with the client was scheduled for the 7th of October, at exactly 4:55 pm. No allowances would be made for a change in timing. This man was a billionaire, and it was made clear to Lisa that being invited to be his doctor was a great honor bestowed upon her. Yet 4:55 pm was the same time that surgery for a lung cancer patient had been scheduled. A crucial surgery, one that could mean the difference between life and death for another patient.

Lisa sat in the cafe, the air conditioning blowing against the nape of her neck, the whooshing sound of the vents the only sound in the still air, pondering her next move. When she rose 2 hours later from the leather seat with a contact number clutched in her hand, and a window period of 72 hours to make a decision, Lisa did not know what to do.

"Earth to Lisa."

The corners of Alexis' mouth were tipped upwards in a wry smile.

Lisa started, and then blurted out, "I don't suppose I could pass on the patient to someone else."

Alexis' eyes darkened from a placid grey to the colour of turbulent storm clouds, and her next words were issued through clenched teeth.

"No, you may not. Doctor Lisa Li, you were the valedictorian of your class from Harvard Medical School. What is the seventh principle of the Hippocratic oath?"

Lisa swallowed. If she had already been flayed alive with guilt from mere chiding, being rebuked like this made her want to run away, sobbing, into a corner. But life with her overbearing parents, who had spit and hit and scolded until she succeeded had given her nerves of steel.

She said steadily, "I will remember that I do not treat a fever chart, a cancerous growth, but a sick human being, whose illness may affect the person's family and economic stability. My responsibility includes these related problems, if I am to care adequately for the sick."

"You would choose money and fame and shirk your responsibility for the sick in the process. Where is your honor, Doctor Lisa?"

The last six words hit her like shrapnel, sharply and painfully.

The patient was utterly forgotten as Lisa placed her head in her hands and wept.

On the night before Lisa had left home for the Mayo clinic, her mother told her in no uncertain terms that graduating as the valedictorian of her class at Harvard Medical school was not an achievement, and that it was merely the fulfillment of a basic expectation.

Graduation day was marked by empty seats in the front row, reserved for the parents of the valedictorian. As Lisa stared out at a sea of unfamiliar faces beaming with pride, she knew that the pride they felt was not for her.

Yet Doctor Lisa Li would do the impossible and make her parents proud.

The youngest to be admitted to the surgical department of the Mayo clinic. The highest scores by far in any graduating

class of medical students ever.

For her parents, who slogged and bled and wept to become the top of their cohort in millions of mainland Chinese to come to America, Lisa was a pampered and spoiled child who did not know how good she had it.

Lisa knew that taking this job, being a private doctor to a rich man, would gain their approval, something she had sought for so long, but at the price of her honor. Her decency. Alexis' respect.

The three in the room made an interesting tableau. The one who held all the power to walk her own path. The one who had influenced and created this path, and the one who would be impacted by the path.

Alexis placed a consoling hand on Lisa's arm. When she spoke— words cutting a swath through the air rife with tension— her words were carefully chosen, delicately said.

"Perhaps I have misunderstood—"

Her conciliatory words were wasted on an unappreciative audience.

"Of course, you've misunderstood! I know my responsibility and my duties. But how can I, in good conscience, choose my responsibilities to my patient over my family?"

Lisa's face was tear streaked, voice cracking and breaking.

"I will make my family proud, and this is the only way. Through glory."

For the first time in a long while, Doctor Alexis was rendered speechless, but when she spoke again, her words rang with truth.

"There is no glory without honor, Lisa. If you leave for

your client now, you will live with this burden forever. Of leaving someone behind when you were responsible for them. Of shirking your duty."

Doctor Alexis looked Lisa straight in the eye.

"But if you do your duty now, you will always do your duty, and if you choose to keep your honor now, you will always have your honor. If you can stand up to your upbringing now, you can stand up to anything."

I had come to a fork in the road they call life, and Doctor Alexis set me down the right path. She is the reason I now stand before you with my honor intact, and so my words to the new investees are:

Your honor will bring you glory, but glory will not bring you honor.

New investees, please rise and join me in the recitation of the Hippocratic oath.

Chained By Honor

Michael Cao
St. Louis, Missouri
3rd Place Tie

Arnold Grey wore his finest clothes on the day he was to die.

A draping cloak, sturdily crafted by the town's artisan, wrapped around his shoulders. A leather belt encircled his waist like a snake. Around Arnold's ankles, he felt the cold bite of metal chains, which had been rattling nonstop for nearly three days.

Arnold sat cross-legged in a wagon as it rolled down a rocky slope. The guard at the front of the wagon turned to face Arnold.

"Get ready. We're here."

Arnold remained silent. The wagon neared the end of the path leading to a small village. Several dozen wooden shacks, topped with metal roofs, lined the main road. Slender streams of water shot up from a large fountain, slicing the air like swords. Sullen-faced villagers made hushed sounds as they crossed paths with one another.

"I heard 'das where they gonn' do it," a villager said, pointing to the east.

Arnold kept his head low. As the wagon barreled to a stop, Arnold felt a pair of hands push him behind his back. A flurry of dust swept into the air as Arnold crashed onto the ground.

"What' cha doin' on da ground? Get up!" the guard commanded.

Arnold kept his face planted against the ground, groaning in pain.

"Are ya deaf? When I tell ya to get up, ya get up."

The guard unsheathed his blade.

"Don' make me teach you a lesson."

Arnold rose up slowly. He shambled backwards as the guard approached him with a blade in hand. The guard towered over Arnold with a wide-faced grin, a grin of prestige, of dominance.

"Yer just scum," the guard laughed, "kneel."

Arnold took a few steps back.

"Na, I won't... I, I gon' keep my honor. I never kneel."

"Ya got no honor anymore, ya fool. Kneel."

"No."

Arnold saw the silvery white of a blade glisten above him, followed by a blur. A sharp pain stabbed Arnold's back, spreading across his spine as if it had been burnt. The guard cackled as Arnold called out in pain.

"Ya gunna kneel or not?" the guard asked, adding, "we can do 'dis all day."

"I, uh--,"

Another blur, followed by scorching pain. Arnold called out like a wild boar that had been shot by a hunter as he grasped at his bleeding rear. His legs gave out and he collapsed onto the earth. The dirt underneath him was stained a brick red as a pool of blood formed around Arnold.

"I admire yer loyalty," the guard said, "but ya'd be a damn fool if ya don't kneel."

There was a moment of silence before Arnold placed his hands on the ground, heaving himself to a stand. He gripped his bleeding back tightly as he stared stony-eyed at the guard. The guard holstered his sword and chuckled.

“Heh, yer a tough one... I hate dat. But if I swing again, I’ll kill ya. Let’s go.”

Arnold grunted and followed behind the guard. As he walked, he heard a sound come from the darkness behind the maple trees that surrounded the village. There was a rustling of bushes, a burst of light, and then silence.

Arnold looked down at his feet as he made his way across the path. There was a lush, green hill to the right of the gravel path that towered over the village. At the top of the hill, a flat stone was wedged into the earth, guarded by a knight.

Arnold began to ascend the hill, but at a slow pace. The pain in his back had worsened to the point where he could not take a step without collapsing. He was forced to grasp at the earth with his filthy hands and pull his entire body up.

The guard shoved Arnold into the hands of the knight, transferring him as if he was a mere object.

“We found ‘im charin’ at our army, even after da battl’ was lost. What’ta fool.”

The knight nodded.

“He was a brave soul. Soon, he’ll be in a better place.”

Arnold’s body was then forced onto the rough surface of the stone, which rubbed against his delicate face like sand.

“Do you have any last words?” the knight asked. “The lord is listening.”

Arnold thought for a moment.

“I-, I got honor. Mah family said if I die by da blade, I got honor. So I do. I got honor now.”

His voice was hoarse.

“You do,” replied the knight, lifting his blade.

But the blade never came down. An arrow spiraled towards the knight, slicing through skin, fat, and bone. In that order. A pained scream followed, and a suit of chainmail slammed against the ground. Screams filled the air as the hurried footsteps of villagers sounded across town.

“Bandits!” a villager called out, “run, now, run!”

The thundering hooves of horses crescendoed through the village, muffling the screams of horrified villagers. Silhouetted against a fiery, blood-red setting sun, dozens of horsemen galloped across a distant ridge before charging down the hillside. Arnold stood still, his pupils stretched wide and his mouth open.

A fear-faced villager gave Arnold a shove and yelled, “What are ya doin, boy? Run!”

“I... I gon’ die by da blade. Mah father died by da blade. Mah brother died by da blade. I gon’ die by da blade. Gon’ have honor and glory.”

Arnold took a step towards the horsemen. The villager ripped off his hat, throwing it onto the ground.

“There’ll be no glory today! Run, boy, run! Live another day.”

“I--,”

“I don’ care, boy! If ya aint gon’ run, then ya gon’ die!” the villager said as he ran off.

Arnold looked into the blood-filled massacre, and he saw glory. Honor. A warrior’s death. Then, he looked into the horizon, where the sun had begun to set. He saw freedom, an escape from the burdens that had held him back. A future.

And he ran.

Wang Chung-ing Away

Nathalie Mitchell
Seattle, Washington
3rd Place Tie

It was an intimate horror I experienced watching my mom dance. I was seven years old. My mom's jiving, jitter-bugging limbs were waving haphazardly around, her feet skipping over our oatmeal kitchen floor. I was seated at a round table, its legs gnawed grotesquely by our dog, watching her dance, openmouthed.

An intimate horror was the kind that crept on you slowly, biding its time until it pounced, grabbing you with clammy fingers. For me, an intimate horror was realizing that my mom, with her curly mane and unbridled bopping, was not just my mom. She was also a person.

Now, this fact, that my mom was a person, may seem obvious to any other human being besides myself, and maybe my brother. But to me, it was an unsettling jolt. I felt like somebody had just ripped the earth out from under me and left me to flounder in space. For, up until then, my mom had always been a constant: unchanging, steady, my own personal Gravity.

But now? The thought that my mom once had a life before me with joys and sorrows and fill-in-the-bubble exams—it seemed impossible. Yet here she was, dancing in front of me with such vigor that it only could have come from some memory she did not share with me.

I felt robbed. How could she have lived without me, and then not told me about it? My brows started to sink toward each other, and my lips curled down at the sides, invisible anchors at each corner. I took a deep, indignant breath, mustered all the stern severity my seven years' life experience amounted to, and spoke.

"Mom. How could you NOT—," but I was cut short.

At that exact moment, my ears registered the beat to which my mom was grooving. It was... catchy. Upbeat. Good, even. Much to my chagrin, I kind of liked it. I listened closer, face stretched somewhere between a grimace and reluctant curiosity.

"...to be with you tonight/ so if you're feelin' lo-ow/ turn up your radio-oh..."

The lyrics ballooned in my head, neon, glowing loudly like the Vegas lights at night—obvious and a little overbearing, but undeniably colorful (this was how I pictured anything 80's-sounding).

"What song is this?" I demanded, my previous frustration already dissolved somewhere in the afternoon sun.

Instead of answering me directly, my mom picked up with the chorus:

"Everybody have fun tonight! Everybody Wang Chung tonight. Everybody..." She faded into the booming synthesizer.

I got up to join her, feet tap-tapping eagerly, a smile bubbling across my chubby cheeks. I knew in that moment, at least, my mom was happy to just be my mom.

Since that day, *Everybody Have Fun Tonight* by Wang Chung has held a special, one-hit-wonder, 80's-themed nook in my heart. Whenever Jack Hues would start crooning the bridge or various voices whooped and hollered in the refrain, I would try to imagine my mom when the song came out in 1986. She was young, around 20, hearing it for the first time on the radio. I thought of her reaching for the dial and turning the volume up, perhaps bobbing her head with her friends in rhythm. They were all clad in denim jackets with the collars flipped up, car cruising lazily down some eternal, beachside boulevard.

Then I imagined my mom holding me as a baby, denim days behind her. I saw her reading me a bedtime story (*Peter Rabbit*—she was always one for the classics), dropping me off for my first day of high school barely a week ago, and all the times in between. It awed me to think that she had a life before me, but now I got to share it all with her.

I got her whole future, and that catchy song, too. Rest assured, we will be Wang Chung-ing away the rest of our time together.

Creative Writing ~ Ages 16 – 18

Poetry

First Place

Ji Hyun Lee
Qingdao, China
Where I Am From

Shelley Choi
Seoul, South Korea
Metamorphosis

Second Place

Jae Yoon Kim
Chestnut Hill, Massachusetts
Horses of San Marco

Paige Stetson
El Paso, Texas
Of the Planets

Third Place

Amrita Bhasin
Menlo Park, California
Song of the Mermaid

Kisara Dang
Kerrville, Texas
Brainweeds

Zhimei Xu
Atlanta, Georgia
In Memory

Stories

First Place

Sylvia Nica
Cincinnati, Ohio
A Worry Delicate as Snowflakes

Emma Forman
Lake Forest, Illinois
Backfire

Second Place

Peter Youn
Grover, Missouri
A Red Chrysanthemum for My
Grandfather

Third Place

Amrita Bhasin
Menlo Park, California
The Last Day

Daerin Hwang
Seoul, South Korea
A Puppy Raised on Chinese Noodles and Love

Where I'm From

Ji Hyun Lee
Qingdao, China
1st Place Tie

I am from a marshmallow-and-mint scented candle lit room,
Where I lie in complete serenity
I am from a laptop covered in incautious dents and scratches
Filled with inspirational quotes and mesmerizing pictures of desserts

I am from three homes that always welcome me with a big warm hug,
Where I have learned everything from walking to counting to living
I am from friends that compassionately take me in for who I am
Who taught me how to care and love wholeheartedly

I am from the scent of waffles and syrup climbing up into my nose
That nicely unfolds my heavy eyelids and pulls me out of my bed
I am from sweet, spicy, and salty jumbling on the tip of my tongue
As I taste tiny bites and sips of what's cooking in the kitchen

I am from memories of my sister and my dog that cure me from anything
Like a remedy that can fight any disease
I am from the love I get from my family that warms me up
Like a fireplace and a cup of hot chocolate on a frosty winter evening

I am from daydreams I have around 9AM
Of myself decorated in honor from saving the world
I am from wishes and goals waiting for me at the finish line
Requiring me to jump over hurdles twice my height

Metamorphosis

Shelley Choi
Seoul, South Korea
1st Place Tie

It's a peculiar word,
 Metamorphosis.
It's really nothing more than a biological process,
a beast to a beauty in the hard shell of a cocoon.
And so for a Society that yearned for anything that resembled a renewal,
anything that resembled the start of something fresh,
it instantly latched onto the caging obsession to breed children... into butterflies.

Society screams,
Butterflies are earthly creatures like no other!
No other can emulate their gorgeous pointed ends,
a glistening sapphire rustling its wings under the sparkles of sunlight,
a bright cherry red flirting about the rosy aroma,
a dark tiger hue flitting through little dots of white.

 But no one,
no one mentions how disgusting their black bodies look between their wings,
a gaping representation of an empty Soul,
swirling with a repulsive black of nothingness,
trapped between miles of outstretched wings.

No one mentions the iron cocoon they begin to trap me in,
morphing me and burning my own wings,
broken from countless hours of banging against tightly woven
 thread that refuses to answer my raw throat,
 thread that binds me so tightly it leaves me gasping for breath,
 thread that molds me as if I'm a piece of plastic

 into a perfect, oh,
 so perfectly shaped,
 Butterfly.

I sometimes wail for Mom,
for she certainly remembers the sleepless nights, twinkling stars,
and my painted visions of wearing a parrot's feathers or a zebra's print.
But even though I see the sad remorse in her downturned lips,
she's just like the rest of them,
a tiny fluttering orange among the army of flapping wings threatening to engulf me
whole,
and she gently picks me back up,
into my cocoon.

Trapped, again, alone,
my thoughts wander the expanses of the universe,
sickening wings refusing to stop beating,
flitting from one memory to another.

In my saddest,
I'm sobbing over splattered ice-cream.
In my happiest,
I'm slurping popsicles under a sky that tears open with orange streaks,
sparks leave aerial tails in the glare of another streak.
My smile is immortalized in a film shot,
paralyzed in a gap-toothed smile.

Nostalgia,
a corner of my mouth lifts,
but my eyes dart open to the threaded room,
trapped, still, alone.

I wonder what it would take to rewind time,
released from Society and Expectation's iron grip,
but at every corner of my cocoon Expectation stiffly bends her prim form,
coiling herself around me, suffocating.

And I wonder when the film roll inside me will soon submit,
when all the saturation fades into sepia,
for whenever Society screams for a renewal,
it's a step closer to adding another ingredient into my iron cocoon,
it's a step closer to becoming a Butterfly,
trapped, vague, alone.

And I'm not certain
I'll be immune
to the thick pale liquid of renewal,
shaping me,
wiping my soul,
renewing my
mind.

Horses of San Marco

Jae Yoon Kim
Chestnut Hill, Massachusetts
2nd Place Tie

Look upon the horses of San Marco,
Lay eyes upon its golden sunlight mane.
Muscles flexing with triumphant ego,
It spares no enemy to ensue bane.

Veins filled with songs of victory, its legs
Are suspended in military march.
A march across the internal sea. From
The Byzantines to Pariser Platz park.

But quiet in the basilica stands,
the real steeds hidden away in shadow.
Its golden mane chipped away now dull bronze.
its muscles rusted from blood soaked streets.

All set eyes on the horses of San Marco.
Lay eyes upon its broken rusty mane.

Of the Planets

Paige Stetson
El Paso, Texas
2nd Place Tie

Mercury is always sunburnt - he swallows the warmth of the sun like honey. His hands clothe the craters, trying to fill the depths with dust. When he runs, gravity kisses his feet. Rock and roll swims through each ear. He wishes for a moon.

Venus wraps locks of hair around her index finger. She inhales flames, exhales velvet. The hem of her skirt loops around her spinning and spinning and spinning. Her freckles laugh when she reads a good book.

Earth nurtures. She cradles animals in her arms, whispering stories of evolution. Salt water evaporates - jumping off the tip of her tongue. She is endlessly fascinated by human beings, despite being the dirt under their soles. Her time is spent gregariously.

Mars has a furrow in his brow and blushes a little too easily. He pieces together webs of stars, counting the light years between him and Venus. Red strokes paint his existence, capturing the angst and the beauty. He is one of passionate rationality.

Jupiter's laugh can set Mars off orbit. His grins hide the secrets of eternity and the sleeves of his shirt seem to always be rolled up. He goes for long drives on Sunday afternoons, feeling the stillness wrap around his knuckles.

Saturn wears hoop earrings. Often tears form canals down her cheeks, intermingling with dissolved eyeliner. She feels the sublimity of science, carving her imagination out of parabolas, formulas, theories.

Uranus always tilts his head when he smiles. He finds himself forming clouds with thread - letting the texture linger around his head. He plays Beethoven on the cello, finding strength in his fingers, in the resonance of sound. To him, blue is beautiful.

Neptune watches rain drops smear the car window in an array of translucence. His mind is consumed by philosophy and physics. He never smiles with his mouth open. One day, he hopes to touch the sun, to feel the absent warmth scorch his skin.

Song of the Mermaid

Amrita Bhasin
Menlo Park, California
3rd Place Tie

A plastic bottle
Left carelessly on the beach
Drifts across oceans
Choking a seabird

On Hanauma Bay
A paradisiacal cove of coral
I snorkeled in the calm, iridescent water
In a dreamscape of underwater life

The ocean is a large blue fabric
An expansive quilt covering the space between continents
A turquoise tapestry teeming with schools of fish
But an oil spill oozes an imposing ink stain
A puddle swallowing the fish

The sea looks beautiful -
It is stunning from the outside
But 300 feet below sea level
There are spaces of wasteland
Plastic debris threatens life
Jellyfish, albatrosses, barnacles
Drown in the unknown vortex

The future ocean should be magnificent
Inside and out,
A fluid and lucid world
An aquamarine drapery
Sheltering all it contains

A place unlike the present
Where upon swimming in the ocean,
I am more likely to encounter a plastic bag drifting on the surface
Than a brightly colored fish
Flittering among the waves

I can hear the mermaid's song
Insistent and urgent
Calling out to us who grace the land,
Will we save the realm of myths and legends?
Sailors, shipwrecks, buried treasures
The lighthouse blinks a siren song
Will we heed the call?

The great white shark is defenseless
The deep blue waters are powerless
Our drift nets have spread like tentacles
Enveloping all in their path

Every day I hear the mermaid's song,
It's there every time a plastic bag
Litters the beach,
Sea lions wash up on the sand
A humpback whale helplessly tangles in a net
The mermaid sings her urgent song

Will we tell a future generation
Of scuba diving in the Caribbean
Riding the waves in Santa Cruz
Sailing on the Mediterranean Sea?
What if they ask us
Why did you not do anything?
Why did you not heed the mermaid's song?

Brainweeds

Kisara Dang
Kerrville, Texas
3rd Place Tie

spring is in the air once more,
and as the flowers loom and blossom,
i am once again reminded
that I am inadequate of growing anything but weeds.

crabgrass and pursianes decorate my little head,
and
overgrown and unattended,
they multiply and conquer—
without limitation or care in the world—
every crack in my skull,
festering upon every thought
that touched the sun.

but there was once a time
you planted seeds,
with promises of chrysanthemums and calla lilies!
oh, premature glee!
be still, heart!

we planted hope in a field of weeds.

i tended them,
with complete and utter care,
singing sweet nothings,
whispering dreams of a tomorrow garden
of bluebells and forget me nots

yet, spring came,
and blossom, they did,
but brought only dandelions.
you stroked their petals in disbelief
and laughed with absolute terror—
as if i could alter their nature
as if i had anything to offer but the ground upon which they grew.

i can love and care and hope,
but you cannot turn a weed into a flower.

In Memory

Zhimei Xu
Atlanta, Georgia
3rd Place Tie

I catch frames of you
on trains, shuttles,
windscreens rolling
foreign film of cotton, corn.

Your jade canopies tumble
down slopes of Georgia, Ohio.
I've seen a thousand forests
but your oaks, willows

Press against the sun
with a different shiver, tremble.
Summer showers boil rivers
to milk tea, and branches, grandmas,

Arch and dip in their toes,
but this scene is overcast
with mismatched tones –
like coffee brewed from ground

Dirt, cake spread with
paint, oolong steeped in
sweat, *mantou*
bleached white.

I missed you
I told my mother. She said,
China is not quite as nice as it is in memory.
With each return to that dreamland home,

The sky-slicing mountains
lower, the unruliness of the fields
turn tame, the river can no longer catch
the dripping sun.

A Worry Delicate As Snowflakes

Sylvia Andrea Nica
Cincinnati, Ohio
1st Place Tie

A girl sat in the window waiting for her parents. To her left a fire burned, plating everyone with gold. Refugees, some dusty, others shining fresh as minted coins, sang heartily. Festoons of holly hung from door frames, candles sputtered indignantly, evergreen branches ringed the table. In the corner, a Christmas tree dripped ornaments.

The door opened, ushering a flurry of flakes. The girl sprang forward and enveloped her father.

“Hi Dad,” she said, her voiced muffled.

“Goofy girl,” he responded, ruffling her hair.

The girl ran to her mother.

“Merry Christmas,” she said.

Lilly Hawkins, exhaustion clouding her pretty face, turned away.

“Merry Christmas,” she repeated.

Emily’s shoulders drooped.

“Your mother’s tired,” her father whispered.

Her mother was always tired these days. Black curtains covered the windows. Though Emily knew they hid the refugees, she enjoyed their coziness. Old men knit on their hardwood. Women shelled peas in rockers.

Carrying a wooden platter topped with roasted potatoes, Emily’s older sister appeared.

“Eat while it’s hot!” she piped, and set the tray beside the candles.

It was Christmas bliss. A mob of children rushed over, arguing over places while the adults hung back to gossip. As Emily heaped up globs of potatoes, knocking boomed through the cabin.

Adults and children of Number 4 Ruttenberg turned their heads silently towards the door.

The knocking sounded again.

Muted whispers flew throughout the room. One woman screamed.

“They’ve found me!” she sobbed.

Emily’s father moved forward.

“Everything will be fine,” he said, not sounding convinced, and opened the door.

Four shadows stood in the doorway, clutching their hats. Everyone leaned forward to scavenge a peek.

Mr. Hawkins ushered in the figures, saying, “Please, come in. No trouble. Steven sent you, I presume?”

Relieved sighs travelled the room, fizzing out at a glance from Emily’s father. The figures unraveled their shawls and warmed their hands, murmuring thanks.

Emily edged forward, studying the newcomers. All the figures were bone thin, cheeks whipped raw by wind. Their clothes were patched and torn, the original color long faded. They gaped at the festivity.

“Are we safe now, Mama?” the smallest asked, struggling to

remove his woolen scarf. Emily's heart panged.

Around this time, some of the adults commenced drifting out the door, thanking Emily's parents profusely.

"I really don't know what we'd do without this blessed house," said one, fondly patting the walls.

The remainder shuffled below ground, and Emily's mother extinguished the candles. The newcomers opted to spend the night, but with no more space in the cellar, they shared Emily's room. Emily made her annoyance privately known in the kitchen—why should she share?—but eventually relented. Thankfully, the arrivals slept quietly.

Hammers clunking on the roof woke her at dawn, which Emily had learned to ignore. But even she couldn't fall back to sleep when the young boy started to cry hysterically.

"It's just the roofers," she said, waving to her papa through a hole in the ceiling. He waved back, holding several nails between his teeth.

Dragging herself downstairs, Emily sat herself at the table, beckoning the two new children to follow. Once seated, she promptly asked their names.

Patrick, oldest of the two, stated proudly his name, remembering Emily's original question.

Eric, the boy who'd cried, whispered his name, and then said he was five. Eric wasn't sure if he was afraid or not.

Impatient, Patrick banged his forks.

"Let's catch frogs!" he exclaimed.

Emily explained that frogs hibernated in winter, but agreed to visit the pond. The two boys squealed and bounded after her.

The morning was calm. Scaling snowdrifts, skidding down snowbanks, they arrived at the pond. Emily spotted holly growing several meters away.

"Go explore," she instructed the boys, and went to collect the sprigs.

As she rummaged the bushes, Emily heard a sharp crack reverberate through the air, and then Patrick's panicked screams echo from the pond. She pocketed the holly, sprinting back as a stone of fear weighed in her stomach. Her heart stopped upon reaching the pond.

Patrick floundered in the middle of the water, the ice around him in pieces.

"Help," he cried, inhaling several gulps of slush, "I can't swim!"

"Grab onto the ice!" Emily shouted.

Panicked, Patrick lunged too far and hit his head on a turquoise slab. Like a deadweight, he floated face-down in the suddenly still water.

Emily froze. How had the situation escalated so terribly? The refugees were her responsibility.

"Get my Dad, Eric!" she screamed.

"Patrick's stuck in the pond," the little boy said, near hysteria. "Patrick!"

Emily inched across the pond. The ice, translucent in places, creaked ominously. Her breathing quickened upon seeing Patrick's still body. Stealing herself, she dove into the pond, the cold shocking her lungs of air. Grabbing him under the armpits, hauling him onto ice, she

pushed his stomach, whimpering. How had her mother done it? After a few pumps, clear water dribbled out, and clouds of steam escaped his mouth. But Patrick still didn't open his eyes.

Panting, her father appeared at the pond's edge. When he attempted stepping on the ice, it splintered, filling his boots with water.

He tossed Emily the rope.

"Tie this around him!"

But her fingers were so numb.

"Hurry!" her mother appeared next to father.

As if electrified, the command animated the rope. Within seconds, it was tied. Emily hugged Patrick's waist.

"Pull!" Emily's mother shouted.

All three—Eric, her father, her mother, pulled. The cold leached into Emily's skin, inhibiting her breathing. They slid across the ice. Patrick's lips were blue.

"Pull!"

And then they were on shore, and their parents carried them home. With refugees in the house, summoning an ambulance was suicide. Discovery meant all dead, not just one.

That night, as Patrick developed a fever from the cold, Christmas dimmed.

"You naughty boy," his mother sobbed. "You naughty, naughty boy."

All 20 cabin inhabitants stood around Patrick, watching his chest rise and fall. A rag covered his head.

"You were very brave," Emily's mother told Eric, and then she stroked Emily's cheek.

"You did as much as you could."

Emily stuck her face in her mother's arm. It was her fault Patrick was sick.

Throughout dinner, guests continuously rushed to check on Patrick. When it was Emily's turn, she stood next to the boy, a despairing hopelessness enveloping her.

"I'm sorry," she told him. "I'm so sorry."

The boy's movement stopped. Emily saw his chest lay still as ice.

"Mom!" she screamed, panicked.

The adults rushed into the room, Eric not far behind. Worried whispers rushed between them, Emily thought she would faint. And then Patrick coughed and opened his eyes. He looked blearily at Emily's father.

"Santa?" he asked.

They all cried.

That night, Emily sat with her mother and father in the window. Patrick had gone to bed, still weak, and the rest of the guests retreated below ground. Though the black screen hid the stars, Emily imagined the north star as a beacon. She pictured Patrick's blue lips, his still chest.

"Do you think it was a Christmas miracle?" Emily asked.

Her father and mother exchanged glances, and then stroked her hair. They rarely discussed miracles—her sister said they didn't exist.

"I'm sure it was," her father said, taking her hand.

As they sat together on the windowsill imagining the glow of stars, the warmth melted the worry like snowflakes.

Backfire

Emma Forman
Lake Forest, Illinois
1st Place Tie

I never wanted to be a hero. I wanted only to become the opposite: notorious, feared, a despicable ruler, controlling the masses. It's been my goal for as long as I can remember. That craving for power, to manipulate everyone I meet.

That drive was the reason I ended up in front of my living room TV to see the news on the day Aaron Rooney was arrested.

I always watched the news. There was usually someone getting arrested. Sometimes, the police let the suspect say something to the reporters. And occasionally, the criminals made a statement that wasn't an apology, something budding evil masterminds could use to help themselves in their strivings. That's what Rooney did. He said, "Those who lead lawful lives will never be respected." Then police ushered him away and he couldn't say any more.

But that statement stuck with me. It wasn't much different from my regular ideology of "seize power, rule the world." And yet, hearing someone confirm what I'd already known changed something inside of me. I decided something then. I was going to create my own opportunities. Make my own way up. Rooney was right. I'd never gain power if I didn't break rules. I needed to be notorious.

I began my planning.

I bought everything separately, in cash. Kerosene, a duffel bag, matches. I couldn't have a cashier remember me. I wanted notoriety, not a jail cell.

I chose Mercy Hospital as my target. It was useless, just a cramped, musty building. Almost

nobody went there. Emergencies went to the better hospital 2 miles down the road that actually had an ER, and non-emergencies went there too because if it wasn't an emergency, they could take the time to get there. Plus, Mercy Hospital wasn't covered by any insurances, so it was expensive. That's why it was perfect.

The vault room was where they kept the cash paid by the few patrons. I'd rob it before leaving. Now, robbing isn't the way to get infamous. Robbers don't gain much respect. However, that vault wasn't exactly legal. It was an open secret, but the police would never tolerate a robbery claim. The hospital would have to shut down. So, they wouldn't report the robbery, leaving me in the clear.

The day was unseasonably cold. The waiting room was the busiest I'd ever seen it. All three patrons looked as if they were within an inch or two of keeling over from old age. I was probably the youngest non-employee to walk in there for years.

I strode through the waiting room with ease. Nobody stopped me; nobody even asked what I was doing, looking decidedly not sick and skipping the waiting room. I began to reconsider setting the place ablaze, not because of some sudden crisis of conscience, but because I'd be doing the town a favor by taking this rotting, pathetic, eyesore off the map. Well, I was in too deep now.

When I got there, the vault door was unlocked. Unlocked! With thousands of dollars inside. It was too easy to even be a setup. I took a look around the room. The individual lockers were locked, but there was a master control pad right beside the door. I guessed the code -- 1234 -- and unlocked the cubbies. Since I was setting the fire first (so I wouldn't run into

fleeing people) I needed speed to not get burned.

I started in an exam room. I wanted the police to know this was an arson attack. I wasn't going to start it where there were flammable materials. I spread the kerosene generously, backing out into the hallway as I finished. When the final drops were gone, I opened the lighter. Sparks flew and the ground burst alight. I ran back to the vault. I'd be safe there, for a while, but I'd have to be quick. Stuffing fistfuls of cash into the bag, I dashed around the room, collecting as much money as possible. When I'd grabbed everything, I ran for the door -- and paused. I heard a sound, crystal clear above the flames' roar. A crying infant.

Crap. I wasn't a murderer. That doesn't help you get notoriety and respect, just disgust.

I sprinted toward the sound. There in the maternity ward lay a tiny baby. Who the hell fled a burning building without their child?! Who even came here to have their baby? And now their ignorance and stupidity were ruining my plan! I sighed and scooped up the infant. This little child was going to land me in jail, but I was going to save it anyway.

I slumped out the hospital doors. I already knew I'd lost. A crowd had gathered, police lights were flashing, and the firemen were just arriving in their trucks. I was caught red-handed, the duffel bag and kerosene can still on me. I handed over the baby to its mother, who'd run up to me crying when she saw me emerge from the flames. A police officer accompanied her and I felt sick. It was all over. I'd never get my recognition. I was too good in my soul to let a baby die, and for that I'd rot in jail.

So, you can imagine my surprise when the officer told me,

“Good job, sir.”

What? Good job? After committing arson and robbery? I couldn't believe it.

“Am I free to go?” I asked.

“Course!” the cop replied.

“You did a good thing today.”

He took the bag from me.

“Protecting these people's savings and rescuing little Rachel Wood. Staff noticed she was missing outside, but nobody could go back in.”

Oh. So that's why. Still doesn't explain why her mother would come here at all, but some things defy explanation.

A paramedic approached me.

“She'd have died had she been left any longer,” she said. “You saved her life.”

Yeah, but she'd have been fine had I not set the fire at all. A reporter snapped my picture for the paper, and I could feel my ego die inside. It was all wrong. I shouldn't be in the paper. My picture, at least. I'd be fine if the headlines ran— “Fire In Richford, VT -- Feared Arsonist Burns Hospital.” But I was being heralded a hero.

Talk about a backfire. The newspaper the next day made me weep over my oatmeal.

soon be forgotten.

Fire Chief Harry Elder says the fire was an accident. ‘It seems to me a nurse accidentally spilled some disinfectant without cleaning it up, and a stray spark set it ablaze’ (Read more on page 6.)”

I didn't want to read more on page 6. I didn't want there to be more. I hurled the paper at the ground. Disinfectant. This town was so moronic they couldn't recognize an arson when it smacked them in the face.

I'd failed. I'd failed by succeeding. So.... I'm leaving now. I'll change my name, get new documents, dye my hair. I'll go underground. But I'll be back.

“Local Hero Saves Infant, Money in Hospital Fire

When Richford resident James Lattice (24) was caught in last night's Mercy Hospital fire, he knew what he had to do -- the right thing. He saved over 40 patrons' life savings, totaling over \$200,000. He also rescued a newborn girl, whose mother was evacuated before she could return to her child. This man risked his life to save the lives and life work of others, and his heroism won't

A Red Chrysanthemum for my Grandfather

Peter Youn
Grover, Missouri
2nd Place Tie

Standing in the hallway, I am blinded and consumed by a vast expanse of white and the sickly sweet smell of flowers. The ceilings, the floor, the walls, all white. The scent of get-well flowers permeating everything. This sensory assault repeats every Saturday when I visit. Spending Saturdays here has become habit, a part of my schedule.

I pause momentarily before the second door on the right, the same dull brown as the other doors that line the hallway like silent sentries. My hand wraps around the stainless steel door knob and I walk into the room, enveloped by the pronounced beeping of the heart monitor and the room's whiteness. Against the whiteness of everything--the walls, the bed, the hospital-issued gown, the medical equipment--a vase of red flowers on the bedside table assails me like icy water thrown in my face.

Seeing that my grandfather is resting, I quietly move to the bedside table and take a closer look at the flowers. They're chrysanthemums, my grandfather's favorite flower, the flower he planted in the most prominent area of his garden. Memories of the garden flood my mind.

I remember staying with my grandfather over spring vacation when I was 10 and awakening one morning to the creaking of the door leading to his garden. I slid out of bed and quietly followed him, hiding behind the door. Spotting me, my grandfather trudged over to the door, opened it, and silently pulled me into the garden where I had never been before. For several minutes, I stood silently gazing in wonder at what seemed a magical oasis. The chirping of the birds serenaded me, and the heavy scent of honeysuckle rushed into my nose. A flurry of colors flashed before my eyes, each seeming brighter than the next until I saw the brightest of all: a red flower in the middle of the garden.

"Oh, that?" my grandfather remarked after noticing me staring.

"That's a chrysanthemum. It's also my favorite flower. Want to know why?"

"It's really pretty and bright," I had replied.

"It is pretty, isn't it? Do you know what it symbolizes in China?"

"No, Grandpa."

He sighed, "It's about time I taught you about your Chinese roots. The chrysanthemum is commonly given to elders in China and symbolizes a long life. I would like a long life, wouldn't you?"

Even though I hadn't understood half of what he had said, I nodded anyway.

Now as I see the red chrysanthemum against the room's sterile whiteness, I consider the cruel irony of its presence. The flowers in his garden were much prettier than the one in front of me. Unlike flowers produced to be sold, my grandfather's flowers were grown with love and passion.

Just then, I hear the door open behind me. A doctor enters the room, looking down at her clipboard as she approaches me.

"Your grandfather's condition is deteriorating, and unfortunately, there isn't much more we can do to help him. He's in constant pain, and we're not sure how much longer he can last. Any questions?" she asks, showing no emotion and continuing to stare at her clipboard.

I have been told this prognosis four times now, but I am still left speechless. How can she be so callous when telling me that my grandfather has no hope? Like always, I say nothing. I look down at my grandfather and hold his hand. His hand is cold, and his face emotionless. If the heart monitor weren't reassuring me that he still lives, I would think that he had already passed away. Feeling his hand squeeze mine, I recall when he held my hand decades ago.

Every summer, my grandfather, my parents, and I would drive all the way from Illinois to Utah to a wooden cabin in the woods. The trees towered over the house, so there wasn't much sunlight to be seen. Luckily, there was a small opening between the trees that allowed a shaft of sunlight to burst through the shade. In the morning, I would eat my breakfast of two eggs and bacon, get dressed, and run straight towards that patch of sunlight. Sometimes before we got up, my grandfather would lie next to me, holding my hand. One day, while we lay on the bed, I noticed that the patch of sunlight started to move.

"Grandpa, why does the light keep moving? Does it move on its own?" I had inquired.

He squeezed my hand and asked, "Do you know where the light comes from?"

"God?"

"The light comes from the sun beaming down onto Earth. Every morning, the sun comes up and moves across the sky and then comes back down! That's when we go to sleep. Then the next morning, the sun comes back up again, and the cycle repeats forever and ever."

At the time, I thought the sun was a lot like my grandfather and me. Every morning forever, we'd get up with the sun, as we would every morning after that. Or so I had believed. How comforting my six-year-old innocence had been. But how oblivious I'd been to the truth that one day my grandfather would not awaken.

I snap out of my reverie as I see my grandfather's head move slowly towards me. Although his face is pallid and his mouth shows no emotion, his eyes are filled with happiness.

"You're here," he croaks.

"Of course, I'm here. I'm always here."

"I was worried you wouldn't be here today. I wanted to see your face one more time."

"What are you saying? You talk as if you're about... to die."

"I don't want to go. I really don't."

"Then don't! You don't have to go, just hang on a little longer."

"It hurts so much."

As much as I don't want to admit it, I see the happiness in his eyes slowly turn into pain. He is tired. Tired of the pain; tired of the world.

"Take a nap; you need to rest. I'll wake you up in an hour, ok?"

"Promise me. Promise me that you'll wake me up."

"I promise."

I can feel my heart sink as I respond. I want to stop him, but it is already too late. His grip is loosening, and his eyes are drooping. He closes his eyes and seems to be at peace. The heart monitor that seemed so intrusive before starts to slow down, so slow that I can count the seconds in between each beat. As more and more seconds fill the interludes, I feel as if I am waiting an eternity for the next one. I look down at my grandfather and wait for the next beep.

But it never comes.

The Last Day

Amrita Bhasin
Menlo Park, California
3rd Place Tie

This was it. The last day on Earth.

The words echoed ominously in Annabelle's mind. She watched her baby brother playing in the corner, his chubby fingers gripping the blocks tightly, and it occurred to her that he would never live to be two. She would never live to be thirteen. Annabelle glanced around her home, from the velvet curtains in the living room to her mother's delicate chinaware on the kitchen table.

Annabelle felt an irresistible rage bubbling inside of her. Her father had passed away a year earlier and she was still reeling from shock. Annabelle had never confided in anybody about her father's death because she didn't forgive him for leaving her family.

She knew he didn't want to die, but she couldn't help feeling angry that her father had left right at the time when she needed him the most.

Annabelle's mother appeared in the doorway as if she anticipated her daughter's apprehension.

"Your father would have been very proud of you. You've been so strong, strong enough for all of us."

Annabelle's mother glanced at her son playing in the corner. She sighed and moved towards her daughter. Annabelle turned, resisting her mother's comforting embrace. She couldn't admit to her mother that the reason she was able to stay strong was that she hadn't allowed herself to grieve and had instead used her anger for strength.

Her mind flashed back to the newscast on television announcing the meteor's incoming path. How pathetic that a television broadcast had been their death notice! They all deserved more than this.

Annabelle needed somebody to blame for what was happening. She needed to believe that the world was ending for a reason.

But everybody knows nature has a strange way of working, and Annabelle knew she had to accept what was happening. In less than twelve hours, Earth would be nothing.

Mr. Bartley sat in his rocking chair. The chair had been in his family for years. His wife liked to lie on it and crochet, and his children used to relax there and read before they went off to start their own families.

But, now it was just Mr. Bartley sitting in the chair. He had watched his children grow up and move away, and he had been there for his wife as she uttered her last words.

As a child, Mr. Bartley was an avid reader. He recalled a story about a boy who drank immortal water and ended up living forever. At first, he believed it was a miracle but soon he began to realize it was a curse because everyone he cared about died.

A picture on the windowsill got Mr. Bartley's eye. It had been taken years ago on a family trip to Barcelona. Mr. Bartley smiled bitterly, reminiscing a time that now seemed so far away.

Mr. Bartley remembered the stories his grandfather told him as a child. The California drought, North Korea teaming up with Russia and commencing World

War 3...

But Mr. Bartley realized that even if there was a way out of death, he wouldn't have taken it.

Perhaps it was because he was fortunate enough to live longer than most of the townspeople, but Mr. Bartley felt ready to die. Or maybe it was because he understood that there was no escaping the inevitable.

A single teardrop slid down Javier's cheek. Until this moment, he hadn't allowed himself to cry. He knew he had to be strong, if not for Liz then for his unborn baby. It pained Javier to think that he would never get to hold his son. He wouldn't be there for his first steps or his first laugh or his first anything. Javier had only just found love and for the first time in his life, his future appeared bright with possibility.

How was it that a hunk of rock could change everything? Javier dug his fingernails into his palm furiously.

Maybe he would make it out alive. Maybe the meteor would miss Earth and everyone would be okay. Maybe it would change path and hit somewhere else.

Javier felt a hand on his shoulder and whirled around. His wife Liz offered him a cup of coffee. Javier wiped his eye and downed the frothy drink. It occurred to him that this would be the last cup of coffee he would ever drink.

All of a sudden, the walls seemed to close in around him and Javier felt trapped.

"Come on."

"Javier, I don't know," Liz hesitated. "They told us to stay inside."

"Come on! What's the

worst that could happen? You don't want to spend your last day sitting at home drinking coffee."

Javier carefully led Liz through the woods, knocking away thorny branches along the way.

"What's this?"

They were standing in Javier's special spot that was surrounded by ivy and overlooked a small waterfall. Javier had discovered the secluded area one day when he was chopping trees. It was a place that was all his own and he often went there to sit and think. Javier and Liz climbed onto the rocks and sat there. For a long time, neither of them said anything. The two just sat there, relishing the musical sound of the water trickling over the rocks.

Eventually, Javier held Liz's hand and the two began the trek home.

That evening, a bell rang out across the valley. Everybody gathered their most valued possessions and gathered in the town square.

The ground rumbled violently and the townspeople held onto each other. A bonfire was lit and slowly people started throwing their belongings into the fire. Above, the sky had exploded into a fiery mess.

A feeling of impending doom hung over everyone.

Annabelle flung the picture of her father into the fire. It was the last one taken of him before his death and Annabelle knew that her father would have been proud.

"I forgive you," Annabelle smiled sadly.

A peace came over her for she knew that soon she would join her father and somehow, that made everything better.

As Mr. Bartley watched the flames consume his wedding ring, he had no regrets. As people panicked, he remained calm. The ring was his way of realizing that he was happy to have loved and lost, rather than to not have loved at all. And at that moment, Mr. Bartley realized that he was going to be okay.

Javier held a pacifier in his hand. Other people were holding photographs and toys and he'd even seen one man drop a ring in the fire. But to Javier, the pacifier felt right. He understood that what was happening couldn't be controlled. He didn't know if they were all pawns in a game or subjects in a deadly experiment but Javier knew that he had done his best.

The truth was that there were things that nobody could control. And although it was really unfair that Javier would never get to see his son, he couldn't do anything but accept the truth. As Javier hugged Liz, he knew that he had done the right thing.

Across the town square, a revelation was happening. Rivals shook hands and mothers hugged daughters. It seemed that everybody was getting one last chance to leave Earth in peace.

At that moment, nothing really seemed to matter. The sky turned black for the last time and a big, black cloud descended upon the valley.

Everyone joined hands in a big circle.

A Grateful Heart: A Puppy Raised on Chinese Noodles and Love

Daerin Hwang
Seoul, South Korea
3rd Place Tie

There is a saying in Korea that goes, “A grandparent’s love is the honey that sweetens the disposition of the grandchild.”

The reason for this is that older people love unconditionally, without demanding vicarious fulfillment of their own lost aspirations. They have experienced the joys and disappointments of life so fully that they accept reality gladly rather than yearn for it to be more, as we youngsters are apt to. While my parents pushed me to succeed, my grandmothers nurtured my curiosity, generosity, and compassion. Because I have experienced their profound love, it is easy for me to recognize the good in others. Although I owe a debt of gratitude to my parents for my achievements, I have my grandmothers to thank for my openhearted optimism.

A Grandmother Nurtures a Young Viking’s Courage

My maternal grandmother, who raised me from birth until age four, always called me puppy. She had raised seven daughters and one son, whom she loved the most. When my mother invited her to live with us in order to help care for me, she saw an opportunity to experience the most joyful years of her life anew.

She loved me terribly, often proclaiming, “Nature requires that a grandmother’s love for her grandchild be incomprehensibly large.”

When I asked why, she replied: “Only the grandmother knows the immensity of a mother’s task, and so she must use her unlimited love to fill in the gaps left by the mother’s ambition and exhaustion. This way, a child may learn that he deserves love, but must also respect authority.”

Thanks to my maternal grandmother's advocacy and indulgence, I was free to lead an adventurous childhood. I loved playgrounds and rides, but my mother restricted my activities, fearing that I would be injured in a fall. Thanks to my grandmother’s encouragement, by the time I was two I already rode slides alone and spun circles on the carousel until falling down dizzy. As I got older, I set my sights on wilder adventures. Every Wednesday, a small travelling amusement park came to the apartment square. I would watch it from the window all morning, eager to get on the Viking ride.

She always tried to calm me down, saying, “My puppy, wait a minute,” and took me out to the square as soon as the Viking Ship arrived.

Watching me ride the Viking Ship seemed to give my grandmother just as big a thrill as I got by riding on it.

When I disembarked, she would clap her hands and say, “My puppy, I’m so proud of you.”

It was my mother’s instinct to be overprotective. She never wanted me to go anywhere alone and was always afraid that I would fall victim to a freak accident even in the most mundane setting. Thanks to my grandmother, who nudged me to be independent, take risks, and learn about self-reliance, I was able to become a person who relishes challenge and faces the world without fear. Even at age 90, she continues to inspire me with her deep generosity of heart and unbreakable spirit of kindness.

Home Is Where the Jajangmyeon Is

A long-haired man with sunken eyes was looking at me weakly on the interphone screen. With a dirty beard, ragged clothes, and tired eyes, he looked like he had been living on the streets.

“Who is it?” asked Grandma in the kitchen.

When she saw the man on the interphone, “It’s my son, Ilsu.”

Mrs. Park Sung-im is a 73-year-old Korean nanny who started caring for me when I was aged 9. In 2007, when we returned from the U.S., my mother sought a nanny so that she could get back to work, and she selected the oldest candidate, Mrs. Park. My mother thought she would come to regard me as her own child, like my maternal grandmother. For my part, I took an instant liking to Mrs. Park, embracing her as a real grandma, and soon, my mother’s prediction came true.

One reason for the instant affinity between Mrs. Park and me was her excellent cooking. Chinese food was on our table every day after she came to my house. She used to be the owner of a Chinese restaurant in Haerbin, China. Park Sung-im was very strong. She cleaned up quickly and cooked effortlessly, as though dancing a ballet through the kitchen. As I heaped food onto my plate, she smiled proudly. When my mother worked late, I spent my evenings asking her questions, absorbing her vast wisdom. I told her all about my life, and we discussed the differences between my experience of childhood and her own. She also spoke with great admiration about her own children and grandchildren in Haerbin, and I longed to meet them, and to eat all the traditional foods they prepared there.

As my interest in cooking grew, she offered to teach me. Although the hissing of angry blue gas flames and glimmering knives intimidated me, I summoned my courage and agreed. Our first recipe was Jajangmyeon—Chinese spaghetti served in savory fermented bean sauce. As I cut potatoes, onions, and pork into square pieces with a knife and tossed them in a sizzling skillet with chunjang bean paste, she reminded me to be cautious and patient, assuring me that speed would come with practice, but that safety could only be achieved with focus.

We made the noodles by hand, following Mrs. Park’s family recipe. I poured water into the flour and I massaged the mixture until it formed a doughy mass. To make chewy noodles, we had to deflate the dough completely. My skinny arms could not compress the dough forcefully enough, so Mrs. Park took over. Grandma was kneading the dough with all her strength and might when Ilsu arrived.

Everyone in my house knew the name “Ilsu.” Even though Mrs. Park often complained of his bleak employment prospects, it was plain to see she loved her son dearly, and she worked tirelessly to ensure that her grandson would not suffer for Ilsu’s poverty.

On the threshold, Ilsu produced a giftwrapped package. Upon opening it, Grandma Park was speechless, and tears came to her eyes: In Korea, it is customary to buy red underwear as a gift to one’s parents upon receiving one’s first paycheck.

The man patted the top of my head.

“You are Daerin, the puppy.’ When my mum comes home on weekends, she only talks about you. She is proud of you for being so smart and nice,” he smiled at me like an old friend.

Without saying anything, the old lady beckoned her son to the table. Together, the man and I worked on the flour loaf in turn. With two pairs of arms hard at work, the dough was soon chewy enough to be rolled flat

and sliced into thin strands. After a few minutes in boiling water, the noodles were ready.

I have never seen Mrs. Park so happy as she looked watching her two sons dining together for the first time. And in turn, her happiness and delicious cooking filled both of us up, until we overflowed with love. That day, I learned that being family doesn't mean you have to share your lineage with someone—only that you have to share a dinner table, a conversation, and a bowl of the world's best Jajangmyeon.