

# PenWorks



**THIRD ANNUAL  
TRUMBULL LIBRARY  
CREATIVE LITERARY COMPETITION  
POETRY • FICTION • NONFICTION  
2020**



[www.trumbullrotary.org](http://www.trumbullrotary.org)

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May 1, 2020

Dear Reader,

It goes without saying that this year is like no other in our lifetimes, and it seems nothing has been spared. However, we endure. We adapt. Getting from planning, to promotion, to process and to publication, we want to sincerely thank everyone's patience with the Literary Competition. It is a great relief to us that we were able to publish and that we received so many submissions. Thank you for your participation!

Included in this edition of PenWorks are the winning entries of our most recent Literary Competition. We applaud the work of all who entered and wish each of them success in their craft. A special thank you to our judges who spent their time reading each entry and making the hard choice to select the winners. Congratulations to the writers who have been chosen for publication in this year's volume.

To each of the writers who entered and to those at home that are just starting to tinker with their own story, article or poem, we hope that your work makes you happy and that it will serve as an inspiration for others to try their hand at writing as well. Share your stories, make beauty, especially now.

Finally, thank you to the Trumbull Rotary Club and the Trumbull Community Women who have so generously agreed to support the competition, this publication and the many prizes given to the winning entries. This competition would not be possible without their continued support.

Read and enjoy,

*Stefan Lyhne-Nielsen, Library Director  
Town of Trumbull*

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## LITERARY COMPETITION WINNERS 2019

### GRADES 3-5

#### POETRY

##### First Place

*Don't Fret March* ..... Neel Jakka

##### Second Place

*My World* ..... Neel Jakka

##### Honorable Mention

*I Fly* ..... Ezra Dawson

#### FICTION

##### First Place

*Snow White Reversed* ..... Keane Horne

##### Second Place

*Kindness, Kindness* ..... Ria Beri

##### Honorable Mention

*Coco the Siamese Kitten* ..... Vince Quiros

#### NONFICTION

##### First Place

*Super Cousin* ..... Riley O'Neill

##### Second Place

*The Ocean of Unknown* ..... Nicholas Gilman

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**First Place**

**Don't Fret March**

*Neel Jakka*

Flurries blur the windows sight,  
making the world look like an abstract painting tonight.

Flurries fly,  
crossing the sky.  
Making me itch to go outside.

I suddenly think back to the date,  
March 23rd...  
Hey!

Spring has already come so why is it snowing,  
Have we stopped global warming?  
Is the ice age coming?  
I don't want to freeze!

I think and think why has snow come,  
It didn't come during Christmas, or Kwanzaa, or Hanuk-  
kah for a matter of a fact too.  
Then I realized seasons are turning, March must be sad  
now.

For soon April is to come and it will be forgotten.  
It wanted to be remembered, that's why it wanted us to  
stay home and remember the great  
huge annoying quarantine we had,  
Not good or bad, it just wanted to be noticed.  
that's why it wanted to have one of the only snowy days  
of the year.

Don't fret March, for I won't forget you as long as I'm  
here.

As flurries cross the sky I see up to white sprinkles dot-  
ting the icing ground  
with trees with leaves reaching up, I think  
March you won't be forgotten.

Every other month too, for every month and day is im-  
portant.

Every Hour, minute, and second,  
too.

**Second Place**

**My World**

*Neel Jakka*

My world,  
The belly of my mom and  
the crib I sleep in.

My world,  
The house I run in and  
The school I dread.

My world,  
The dormitory I study in and  
The car I first drive.

My world,  
The son and daughter I hug and  
The office I hustle in.

My world,  
The old age home I stay in and  
The worried calls from my grown kids.

My world,  
The coffin I forever sleep in.

**Honorable Mention**

**I Fly: A Collection of Impossible Feats (and How to Achieve Them)**

*By Ezra Dawson*

I fly! I fly! I fly! I fly!  
I dip and soar throughout the sky,  
And anyone can do it by  
Piloting an airplane flight.

I float! I float! I float! I float!  
The ocean water's smooth and cold.  
It isn't all that hard, you know-  
You just go rent a private boat.

I walk on lava, molten rock!  
It neither burns through shoe nor sock.  
And if you will do that, why not  
Get some heatproof boots, I thought.

I sink, I sink, I sink, I sink.  
The ocean floor is very deep.  
"The end is very near!" I think-  
Oh, drat that bargain submarine!

**First Place**

**Snow White Reversed**

*By Keane Horne*

Hi, I'm the "witch" you know from the story "Snow White". People are always saying that I killed her, but it wasn't on purpose. I got a job at a science lab. But I got fired for blowing up the lab and breaking all the science equipment. Now I am in a new lab, but I am by myself. The lab is in a cave in the middle of a dark forest which was kind of sketchy, but it's OK

I started experimenting right away. I thought it would be cool to make an apple that made people healthy when they are sick. So, I went right to work. First, I put a little bit of expositom, minerals, and a magical potion. I looked at it and it looked soooo good. So I ate it. 'OH MY GOSH! this tastes amazing!" I said as I took a huge bite out of the apple. After two minutes I felt a weird feeling like I was transforming, so I went to look at myself in the mirror... "AHHHHHHHHHH, I am hideous!" I screamed as I saw my reflection in the mirror. There stood a hunchback wrinkled skinned witch! I ran to my potion stash and just drank anyone I could see. Sadly, they made me look uglier. Some made more teeth fall out, and some made my hair whiter. I was panicking, but I knew this effect would last forever because the bottle said, "lasts forever". Luckily I was in the middle of

the woods so no one would see me. So, I went back to work. This time I was making a new apple. I started with some consolium, minerals, and a magical potion. This time I was scared to eat it, so I went out to find a taste tester.

I started walking but I knew that it would take a while to find a taste tester, because I was in the middle of the forest! After two hours I found a small cottage and I heard a beautiful singing voice. "There little birdie fly all around," she sang. "Excuse me ma'm," I said but she did not hear me. "EXCUSE ME MA'M!" I yelled. "Oh, yes," she said in a quiet voice. "Do you want to try this apple I just picked from my cave, I mean tree?" I lied. "Oh yes, I love apples," she said as I gave her the apple. "Mmmm, this is so good." She said, "I am getting kind of sleepy," she yawned. No, no it is supposed to heal sick people; not make them sleepy! I thought "No, you can't sleep," I said as I pushed her to an open spot of land. "Do some jumping jacks, pushups, or even sit-ups; just don't sleep!" I said.

"No, I think I will just sleeeeeeep" she said as she fell on the ground.

Then I realized how bad this looked. Me, holding an apple that looks like it is poisoned, and

this lady laying on the floor like she is dead! So, I ran to my cave and got a big glass case. "I am going to hide her in this case and put her in the woods, far in the woods," I said as I ran back to her and put her in the glass case. I ran to the woods. Well, I would not count it as running; more like walking and dragging the case.

As I got there I thought to myself, what if someone follows me and then sees her and tells the authorities, then I would be busted! So, I remembered that I had some dwarf friends named Derick, Sam, Brad, Daniel, Hector, Gavan, and Steve. I first met them senior year of high school. They were the cool kids. One day they asked me to be in their group, and I said yes, totally yes! Then when college came, we went our separate ways, but we still kind of stay in touch. It thought it would be a good idea to call them on my "apple" phone. So I did, I told them the whole story so they could be caught up. They said they would only do it for a price. So, I said 5- 20 dollars a day for the rest of their lives. I told them to meet me to meet me in the central part of the woods at 4:00 pm sharp.

"Vroooooomm" went an airplane above me. Then there in front in front of me stood the famous dwarfs: Derick the cook, Gavan the football player, Hector the singer, Sam the soccer player, Brad the artist, Steven the Olympic runner, and Daniel the doctor. "Yo, what's up fellas? Nice to see you again guys! It's been such a

long time since I have seen you," Is aid trying to be cool, but just being cheesy.

"Sup, Gabby?" they all said together.

Oh yeah, I forgot to tell you my name is Gabby, Gabby Anderson. Anyway, I told them to come to my house to discuss the money.

"So, how much are we talking?" Daniel said (he is the leader of the group).

"Range of 5-20 dollars per hour," I replied.

"We'll take the twenty per hour," Daniel answered. "

You'll start tomorrow," I said.

"So, who is taking the first hour tomorrow?" Daniel questioned.

"Me, me, ooh me, pick me!" Derick said.

"Anyone?" Daniel pleaded. "Fine Derick you can" Daniel moaned.

"Yay!" said Derick.

I started walking when I wandered what if the dwarfs knew this girl? I got there and the dwarfs looked like they were in shock.

"You guys good?" I asked.

"Ya, ya we're fine, but she looks so familiar," everyone said except for Gavan.

"Yeah, I know who it is. It was my ex," Gavan said in a grumpy voice. "You killed my ex!" he shouted. "oh, if you were a boy, I would break every bone in your body," he said as he turned red. "I quit!" he said as he ran away.

That was awkward," I said. "Anyway, who is going first?" I asked.

"I am," said Derick.

"Ok, get started. We will start home; you stay here" I answered.

"Bye," Derick said.

As we walked, I wondered where Gavan went and then it hit me, he probably was going to tell the prince! Oh no! Oh no, this is not good. I could get a life sentence to jail! I need to find him!

"My prince, I have some very important news for you...there is a murderer on the loose! And she murdered my ex-girlfriend!" Gavan said " I can tell you where she is. And the lady is so beautiful. If you can bring her back to life of course, you maybe you would want to marry her," he explained.

I was in my cave eating my bagel when I heard a person walking in the woods. I looked out the window and guess who I saw, the prince! I saw him in front of the woods like he was waiting for someone. Then came out

Gavan! He had snitched on me to the prince! Oh that little man, he is going to pay! It hought! I started to follow them just so they would not find her. As we got closer to the girl I knew if they saw her, I would be in big trouble. So I picked up a rock and threw it to the other side of them. The bushes rustled with a crinkling sound

"Who goes there?" the prince yelled with a bit of fear in his voice.

"It is probably the murderer trying to stop us from seeing the dead body. We should go around and trap her from all sides," Gavan said.

"Smart, very smart," the prince answered with smirk.

They started to walk so I made a run for the glass case. I tried to move it but then ...

"Well well well, just the person we were looking for," Gavan said.

"Wait, stop, get her!" The prince screamed.

I just ran; ran to my cave. Even though I have been pretty slow as a "witch" my legs went faster than I ever have gone even without being a "witch!" As I got to my cave I ran for my secret stash of potions that are not even known to real scientists. It had flying, super strength, super speed, and invisibility. Invisibility! Just what I was looking for! I grabbed it and chugged it until it was gone. I was getting kind of nervous because I

wasn't turning invisible. I took the bottle and read how long it took to change me. It said it takes 40 minutes!

"I don't have 40 minutes: I don't even have 10!" I whispered even though I really wanted to scream. I must go to my STH (secret tunnel hideout.) I had to sneak there because the guards were searching my house. I hid behind a cabinet, then behind my rat cage. Don't ask. But one of my rats (Jake) screeched so loud.

"Screeeeeeech!" went Jake.

"Who goes there?" said a guard as he walked over to me.

I had to do something: run, hide, be invisible. Oh, I really wish my position had worked right away, but no it had to take 40 minutes! I snuck behind the broom and then I saw the STH. I ran to it and put in the passcode. Right as it opened, I jumped inside. There was so much fun stuff down here like a pool, fast food restaurants, video games, movies and best of all.... candy!!!! I could last down here forever, but I only need to stay for 40 minutes.

I got up out of the STH because the potion effect finally kicked in, and I was free. I knew this would last forever because the bottle said "lasts forever." I thought of moving, but I remembered about the coronavirus. So, I thought that if I go into the deep woods, even deeper than I put that young lady, I would be

Fine. So, I started to pack. I went to the deep woods and there was already a small cottage there, so I just moved in. There I started experimenting again. This time I would not get in trouble by the Prince!

Turns out that the prince built that cabin and put cameras in it. So, he knew about my invisibility powers and he made it there as a trap. Anyway, he also changed the potions tag to say lasts forever when it only lasts a year. Now I am in the dungeon for LIFE. The young lady came back to life when the prince saw how beautiful she was and kissed her. I guess people are right about true love's kiss. They got married, and I found out her name. It is Snow White. I don't understand why they told me her name exactly, but they still told me. Life lesson kids when you make a big mistake in your job just quit it; it will save you from all the disastrous stuff in your future. One last thing; they made this story a Disney fairytale. They said to keep it "magical" they had to change the names of the dwarfs. I made a recommendation for Gavan's name; I said it should be Bonehead. The producers said to keep it kid friendly. Here are their new names, Daniel is Doc, Gavan is Grumpy, (which I also recommended, score!) Derick is Dopey, Brad is Bashful, Steve is Sleepy, (which makes no sense if he is an Olympic runner) Sam is sneezy, and Rector is Happy. I hope I can make up for my mistakes and get out, but until then (and how all Disney stories end) "And they lived happily ever after." But the witch, I can't say the same for her.

**Second Place**

**Kindness, Kindness**

*By Ria Beri*

The sound of honking school buses echoed through the town of Aladia. Despite the ruckus and noise caused by this, the sound just wasn't enough to wake 9-year-old Martha out of her deep slumber.

Martha's eyes slowly drifted open as she wondered why it was so bright and noisy outside. Gasping, she reached for her alarm clock, the only answer to her question.

Her eyes practically bulged out of her sockets as she looked at the clock. Stumbling, Martha raced out of the room, grabbed her backpack, and cleaned her teeth with a swift swipe of her toothbrush. Racing down the stairs Martha forgot all about her mother's new expensive crystal vase and where it lay.

Within a split second the sound of shattering glass filled the house and hundreds of dollars lay worthlessly on the floor.

"MARTHA!!! WHAT DID YOU JUST BREAK?!" Questioned her mother, with a furious tone in her voice.

Martha looked down in shame, the vase was broken, just like her heart. She watched in horror as her mom raced into the living room and stared down at the floor with her jaw wide open.

"Just wait till dad sees this" murmured her mother under her breath.

With a deep sigh, Martha grabbed her backpack and slugged out the door. As Martha began to walk she was overcome with guilt and dread. As she searched her brain for ways of forgiveness, Martha heard a voice. She perked up her ears and listened closely to the voice, kindness it whispered, kindness.

Suddenly questions flooded into her mind like waves moving at sea. What did the voice mean? Why had she heard it? Is she the only one who heard it? Most importantly, could the voice help her?

Little did she know, the answer was yes.

Martha entered Candiesville Avenue, trying to forget the mysterious voice. She could see her tall, gleaming school waiting for her in the distance. She couldn't think of anything except for the thrashing she was about to get when she arrived there.

Nevertheless, she couldn't help but glare at the rows of candy, and the aisles of mint and caramel. There was so much candy that everyone in Aladia could get a sweet tooth!

"Oh, I wish I could go in those rows stacked with semi-sweet morsels. It's too bad that I didn't have breakfast." Said Martha to herself.

But as the thought ran through her mind, Martha flash forwarded to the screaming of her teacher and the jeers of her classmates that were patiently waiting for her.

Martha quickly snapped out of her future and returned back to the present. Her ears widened as they eavesdropped to the noise of a loud quarrel. Behind the thick doors of the shop, Martha could hear lots of shrieking and yelling going on.

Martha's heart pounded of curiosity as she slowly peered through the window of the candy shop. Inside she could see things being thrown and shouts being said.

"Thief!" shrieked a familiar voice.

"I'm just giving my share," replied a calm man "there is no need to freak out in such a way."

As Martha eavesdropped on the conversation, curiosity soon began to take the best of her. With her heart pounding heavily she stepped into the messy room. It only took her a few seconds to absorb the state that it was in. Mints lay on the floor, and splotches of caramel tainted the walls.

With her mouth open in shock, Martha stared at the angry person she had heard earlier. Instantly, she recognized the thick black glasses and copper, brown hair. In disbelief, she stared at the woman.

It was her mother!

"It can't be," said her confuzzled mother. "You're supposed to be at school!"

"AND YOU'RE SUPPOSED TO BE AT WORK, NOT GETTING INTO FIGHTS!" Shrieked Martha.

As Martha choked back her fat tears, she instantly realized that she couldn't trust anyone. She stared at the walls again, could her mother really have done this?

Yes, the answer was yes. Suddenly Martha heard the voice repeat in her head again. Kindness, kindness. More than ever, Martha wanted to know what the words meant.

Out of the blue, her mother spoke up, "you're going to have some explaining to do."

Before Martha could contain herself, the words kindness, kindness, came tumbling out of her mouth.

"What?" Both the shopkeeper and Martha's mom exclaimed at the same time.

That caused an awkward silence to fall across the ruined room.

Martha and her mom began to argue about who should be where and why. Meanwhile, the shopkeeper continuously counted a pile of fresh money.

"You owe me, 7 ma'am." Exclaimed the man.

"I don't owe you anything!" Shouted her mother.

"Wait, Mom, why are you arguing?" Asked Martha.

"Well if you wanna know, I was buying chocolates for you because I figured that you were sad about the vase incident. I put the \$7 dollars on the counter. But now this thief is claiming that he never got the money!"

By the tone in her mother's voice, Martha could tell that she was raging. She stared at the little green box decorated in shiny green paper. Topped with a turquoise bow, the box of chocolates seemed to pop out against the background of splattered candies and ruined walls. As she scanned the room with curiosity, something caught hold of her eye.

Stuck to her mother's shoe was one... two... three pieces of green paper. *Money!* Bob, the salesman caught Martha's eye. Bending over Martha's mother let out a huge gasp.

Quickly, she handed the money to the salesman.

"Oh, why.... I'm so sorry." Stuttered her mother. "If you like I'll help you clean this place up. It's in need of a good scrubbing." She eyeballed the room as she talked.

"That would be delightful!" Exclaimed Bob.

The morning flew by as Bob, Martha, and her Mom scrubbed the candy shop. A few customers came in to peek inside, but at the sight of the store, they quickly turned away.

Finally, when the job was done Bob and Martha's mom stood in the corner. They were both side by side and had their hands on their hips. They looked mighty pleased as they glared at the room, which was much cleaner than before. The walls gleamed and the candy was stacked gently and neatly against the aisles. No more peppermints lay unattended on the ground. As Martha stood admiring the view, she heard the voice. Kindness, kindness.

Bob started to say, "Thank you Mrs..."

"Shaper" Interrupted Martha's mom, blushing.

Soon it was time to leave and go home. Martha rushed out the door followed by her mom, who was holding the chocolates. As they headed home, a little voice whispered in her ear. "Kindness," it said, "Kindness

Martha continued walking home, thinking about her day. The words kindness, kindness, floated through the autumn air, someday to land at your doorstep.

## Honorable Mention

### Coco, the Siamese Kitten

*By Vince Quiros*

Coco the Siamese kitten was only one of her tiny brothers and sisters. They were all the same. Coco didn't know her name yet, in fact, she didn't even have one.

Little did she know, Coco was going to be the first out of her brothers and sisters to be picked by a human family. Besides, she was dying to get out of her loud, disgusting, house. It reeked of old socks, and a bunch of other stuff that Coco didn't recognize.

Coco lived with eight other cats, including her brothers and sisters. But Coco's main problem wasn't the smell or all of her brothers and sisters. It was the BEAST. Well, the beast wasn't really a beast, it was just a dog, but it was still HORRIFYING, because the only thing that was separating the cats from the beast was a thin screen door.

The next day a family came to the house to adopt a kitten. "Who are these people?" the cats and kittens thought. "Are they going to play with us? Or bring us ham?"

The family was here to pick out a kitten. It was a family of three, a mom, a dad and a little boy. The family looked at all the kittens and picked them up and played with them. "I told you they were here to play!" one of Coco's brothers said. Of course, it only sounded like "Meow" to the family and the kittens' owner.

Just when Coco thought she thought she didn't have to worry about getting picked up and held in the air, the man picked up Coco and showed the little boy.

"How about this one?" the dad said. "Maybe," the little boy said. "I'm going to play with her a little first." The boy picked a long sting with a handle attached to it and waved it in front of her. She batted at it a bit and pulled it. Some of the other kittens joined in.

After the boy played with Coco, he picked her up and held her. "Let's get her!" the boy said. "And we're naming her Coco?" the mom asked. "Yup!" the boy said. Then he put Coco in the cat cage, and he and his family left.

"Meow!" (Bye bye) Coco said to her brothers and sisters.

On the way out Coco spotted the beast glaring at her. "Meow" (bye bye), Coco said to it. The beast didn't say anything, just stared at her and growled. Then Coco thought about what the mom has said before. "C-oc-o Co-co"...Coco repeated it to her herself. "I think that's my name, and also my mother's." Coco thought.

It was a long drive home. Coco was scared. "Meow?!" (who are you people?!) Coco asked. "We are your new family!" the boy said. That sent Coco the wrong message.

From then on, Coco thought that meant they understood everything she said. It was just a coincidence that the boy answered Coco's question. When they finally got home, Coco stayed in her cage for a while. The family gave Coco a toy mouse to try and lure her out.

Eventually they gave up and left the toy mouse by her cage. Coco dragged it closer to her. “Mewo!” (I believe this is my mouse). She remembered to look around to around to make sure there were no dogs or anything. Coco peaked her head out of the cage and looked around. No dogs so far. Coco peaked her head out a little more. “No brothers or sisters.” she thought. Then Coco took a whiff of the air. “No socks.” Instead it smelled like...nothing. THAT was a relief.

Then Coco realized she was tired and so she decided that she would take a nap for a while. She was sound asleep until she woke up from loud noises coming from the other room. Coco realized that she should probably see what it was.

As she crept into the living room, she realized what the noise was. The boy was starring at a screen that seemed to change every few seconds. The boy was also holding something. “A ball of yarn maybe?” No, it was something else. But Coco had no idea what. The boy seemed to be to clicking and pushing pieces of the thing he had in his hands.

Eventually the screen stopped moving and the boy got mad. “Awww!” he said. “I almost won!” The loud booms stopped along with the screen. It was safe now so Coco walked into the room.

The boy had only noticed her now. “Hi Coco!” he said to her, making the screen black. He walked over to her and picked her up. “Meow!” she said.

Coco was still scared of him so she jumped away from him and hid under the couch pillows. Coco slept under

there. When she woke up, it was 9:00 in the morning! As soon as she woke up, she jumped off of the couch and waddled into the kitchen.

The women gave Coco food that tasted a lot like chicken and barbeque sauce. It was pretty good, but before Coco could have a lot, the boy and the women picked up Coco and brought her upstairs. The boy was carrying a basket that had a lot of cat toys in it. When they got to the top of the stairs, they went into a room and shut the door. The boy dumped out all of the cat toys and Coco went for all of them. She caught a small blue mouse in her mouth and carried it by its tail.

For the next few days she stayed in her room where she ate, played, and slept. One day, new women came her to her house and played with her. Something told Coco that she was another member of the family. Coco smelled...uh oh, dog! Coco got scared for a second but then realized there was no danger unless she actually saw a dog.

The women who came to the house brought new toys for Coco to play with. A strange blue squid, a fake animal head that had a bell inside, and a bunch of small squishy soccer balls. The boy held up a soccer ball and asked, “Do you think Coco will fetch these?” “She might.” Said the woman who smelled like dog. Coco didn’t know what that meant, but she got excited when the boy threw the ball. “Meow!” (what am I supposed to do with this ball?) Coco asked. “Whatever!” She didn’t care right now. She cared about her new home and she liked it.

In the next few weeks, Coco learned to play fetch, that squirrels are the bas guys, and she had her own room upstairs. Coco also liked her family, the boy, the women, and the man. And best of all, there was no beast!

**First Place****Super Cousin**

*By Riley O'Neill#*

We stop at a red light. I groan. It turns green, I shriek with excitement in my head. I try not to act like a little kid, but I can't help it. "Are we there yet? Are we there yet?" I ask. We are spending the night at my mom's cousin, Erin's house because she just had twins. My mom had already met them before and said they were cute and stuff, but I couldn't just take her word for it, I had to see for myself!

Two hours later, we're there. I could feel myself about rip off my seat belt when my Mom asked "Ry, can you help me unpack everything and bring it inside?". I groaned and threw my head back. I was about to ask her why my little sister Caragh, couldn't do it, but she had already run inside, trying to avoid the same question.

I walked up the garage steps wondering, thinking about who I was about to meet. "What will they think of me? Will they like me? Will Erin think I'm a good enough cousin?" luckily, Mom could read my mind. "You'll be fine. They're just babies. They won't think anything about you. Mostly because they really can't." She said. "I'm just nervous that

Erin will think I'm not a good enough cousin." I said. She rolled her eyes. I just turned and opened the door.

I walked into tons of dogs jumping on top of me. My dog Cooper, and the two other dogs Molly and Harper. "Hi guys!" I said I plopped all the stuff on the floor and walked over to where my sister was standing and looked over towards Erin's husband, Damon was holding two tiny, adorable twin babies. I smiled so big my Mom could probably see from the kitchen. "Aww" we both said. "Girls this is Camdyn and Caitlynn" he said. "Wow, they are so cute!" I said. I was about to ask who was who but then Caragh interrupted, "Can we hold them? Please?" he smiled and said "Sure. You just have to be careful." He said eyeing Caragh. She had no clue.

He sat us down on the couch and asked us, "Okay, who wants to hold who?". Earlier during the ride there, me and Caragh argued over who was taking care of which baby. But now it didn't matter. Now was the time to show that I was going to be the best cousin ever. I decided to take Camdyn. "How do you know who's who?" I asked him. "You always know who Camdyn is because she has a red dot on her nose." Damon said. He put her in my arms and gave a sigh of relief. I looked down at Camdyn and smiled. "Hi Camdyn." I whispered. My Mom came over and sat down next to me. "So, what do you think?" she said. It took me awhile but then I said, "Great."

After a while of holding them, Camdyn started to cry. The parents looked over to see what was wrong and then all eyes were on me. I froze. "What are you gonna do Ry?" Mom said smiling. I had no idea what to do. I felt like running away. I felt tears coming to my eyes, but I just blinked them back and looked to see what was wrong, but it was too late, Erin had already taken her from me. "Wait! Give me another chance!" I thought, but I was too upset. Mom came up to me and said, "you okay?" I nodded and then asked, "did I do something?" she laughed. "No, no, no. That's just the way babies are. They could be in paradise but still start crying for no reason." That made me smile. Luckily, Erin heard us talking. She walked up to us with Camdyn in her arms and said, "She's right. Sometimes babies cry for no reason. You did nothing at all." Then an idea popped in my head, "can I hold both of them?" I asked. She seemed surprised. "Sure, just remember..." "be careful yeah I know." I said

It felt so good holding both, I felt like a could raise 23 elephants and not break a sweat. The rest of the day went smoothly. Mom held the babies, so did Dad. Some of the best moments were when I saw them open their eyes and seeing them smile. I had a hard time sleeping because of how much they kept getting up, but who cares. When we left the next day, I left feeling proud and grateful to have such great cousins. And I hope they feel the same way about me.

THE END

## AUTHORS NOTE

**Its been two years since that happened, they're older now, walking and sort of talking, we face time almost every week and it never gets boring seeing them. I love spending time with them, and they always seem a little different every time. They are so awesome. I hope you liked this story!**

**Second Place**

**The Ocean of Unknown***By Nicholas Gilman*

The ocean is a beautiful, wondrous, and majestic place. But this amazing place has been neglected for centuries and needs to be explored. The ocean has been unexplored for a long time, and over that time it has deteriorated and fallen apart. We need to research it now before it is too late. We have spent an arm and a leg on getting more and more research on space, but the more money and time we spend on space, the less ocean exploration is done. The ability to live underwater has been dreamed of for a VERY long time, but have we ever looked into making it possible?

My first reason is that the ocean is deteriorating before our very eyes, and we are doing nothing to find out more about it before it's too late. Plastic production and consumption are predicted to double over the next 10 years. That means that if we don't do something now, we could be facing 250 million metric tons of plastic in the ocean in less than 10 years. Every year, 8 million metric tons (between 4.8 and 12.7 million tons) of plastic end up in our oceans. It's equivalent to five grocery bags filled with plastic for every foot of coastline in the world! If we explore the vital human-to-ocean connection on how the ocean can provide for people, and how

our impact affects the health of our oceans, then we will know more on how to save the ocean. There are currently 5 trillion pieces of plastic waste in the world's oceans, according to the Ocean Cleanup, a project dedicated to ridding the ocean of waste. Some of the impacts of plastics in our oceans are the ingestion, suffocation and entanglement of hundreds of marine species. Marine wildlife such as seabirds, whales, fishes and turtles, mistake plastic waste for prey, and most die of starvation as their stomachs are filled with plastic debris. For example, as part of an expedition to the Marianas Trench in 2014, a team of scientists discovered a new species. Located about 6,900 meters below the ocean surface, this life form was already polluted with plastic before it was even known to science. As a result, the scientists named this new species the eurythenes plasticus (according to google, and [IUCN- Marine plastics](#)). Floating plastics also contribute to the spread of invasive marine organisms and bacteria, which disrupt ecosystems.

My next reason is that the ocean is very unexplored and space (our solar system) is almost fully explored. The ocean takes up about 71 percent of Earth's space, yet 95 percent of that ocean is completely unexplored. J.L.B Smith states in The Times of London, "We have in the past assumed that we have mastery not only of the land but of the sea... We have not. Life goes on there just as it did from the beginning. Man's influence is as yet but a passing shadow.

This discovery means that we may find other fishlike creatures, supposedly extinct still living in the sea." In other words we have done pretty much nothing to try to figure out what may be lurking in the deep dark depths of the sea (Research done by [Conservation International](#)). Fabien Cousteau (aquanaut) spent 31 days conducting scientific research at an underwater science lab called Aquarius. It cost about \$15,000 a day to operate the lab, which is funded by the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration, a federal agency. Cousteau's research, like most underwater research, gives us a better understanding of the challenges facing our environment, both below the sea and up on land. NASA spends \$19.3 billion, out of \$3.95 trillion in federal spending. That means the US devotes about 0.5% of its budget to all things space related. In other words, it costs more than \$60 million just to send one astronaut to the International Space Station. Also, NASA's space exploration budget consists of 3.8 billion dollars. While its sea exploration budget consists of only 23.7 million!! That's WAY less than even half of their space exploration budget.

Underwater explorers (like Fabien) face the same kinds of difficulties as astronauts in space. They must take along their own air supply and protect their bodies from dangerous pressures and temperatures. On Earth's surface, the weight of the atmosphere puts 14.7 pounds of pressure on every square inch of the human body. In the ocean for every 33 feet (10.6 meters) you go down, the

pressure increases by 14.5 pounds per square inch (psi). The deepest point ever reached by man is 35,858 feet below the surface of the ocean, so the total pressure of the ocean (excluding the Mariana Trench) is 1086.61psi. On the moon the pressure is 14 psi and add that to the amount of pressure in a space suit (4.3 psi) and the total pressure is 18.3 psi. Initially it looks like the moon has more pressure than the ocean, but the farther you go down in the ocean, the more the pressure builds up. This results in you have 29 psi when you are only at 66 feet below sea level. Therefore, the ocean (at a deeper elevation) has more pressure than the surface of the moon. This shows me that we have overcome the way to stay in space without suffering from the pressure, so scientists should spend more time on getting that pressure dealt with in the ocean.

This would eventually get us to the bottom of the ocean (Research by National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration/[NOAA](#)). The United Nations has declared April 12 to be the International Day of Human Space Flight. Yet the future of space exploration has never been more uncertain. NASA, the U.S. space agency, is ending its 30-year-old space shuttle program! 30 years is a long time to be in space researching, therefore they must have a lot of information on space. Therefore, there is no more information needed on space being that people have been there for 30 years! We have been to space 565 times, of that 565, three people completed a

sub-orbital flight, 562 people reached Earth orbit, 24 traveled beyond low Earth orbit and 12 walked on the Moon. Space travelers have spent over 29,000 person-days (or a cumulative total of over 77 years) in space, including (multiple) over 100 person-days of spacewalks. Add that to the 30 years of space time and that's a LONG TIME!!

For my final reason, if we start quickly and research now then we may be able to live underwater. 4 billion years left. If the rising water levels keep rising, then (if we research it now) we can live under water with enough space to sustain life underwater. As sea levels and populations rise, and we begin to run out of space on land some pioneers think that we should begin to colonize oceans. The Japanese have already planned out the science and structure behind the idea of living underwater. This is critically important for us this century. Our population is rapidly growing toward 9 billion people and our demand for food, fresh water and energy is predicted to double. Healthy oceans can help ease the increasing burden our population is placing on this planet, but we need to be able to explore, observe and learn about the oceans in their entirety in order to protect and conserve them effectively. We already have a few homes underwater anyway. So, if we do all this and preserve the ocean as much as possible, then this all may be possible for everybody to have. And as a bonus we will be safe from most natural disasters (volcano(s), droughts, landslides, wildfires, heat

waves). Some people say that it would be impossible to create an underwater house that can sustain for at least a year of viable oxygen. I challenge this. I don't agree that it won't stand/ be sustainable for at least a year, because if we could find a material that doesn't rust from water (like aluminum) and build a base/house out of it (aluminum). Then we will be able to transport people into the aluminum housing (one family at a time) and achieve the goal of underwater housing.

Many of us look up into the night sky and wonder what lies beyond the stars. There are others who have the same feeling when they look into the ocean's depths. It cannot be denied that we have spent vast resources on space exploration; the same is not true of ocean exploration. The ocean is such an overlooked sanctuary. If we really commit to saving, researching, and building underwater, then these far-fetched ideas, like living underwater, could be a reality. It takes the commitment of the scientific community to make ocean exploration a priority before it is too late.

LITERARY COMPETITION WINNERS 2019

Grades 6-8

**POETRY**

**First Place**

*Gumption*.....Anoushka Mukherjee

**Second Place**

*Two Sides, One Glory*.....Genesis Jetter

**Honorable Mention**

*The Flower Garden*.....Molly Amighi

**FICTION**

**First Place**

*Escape from Hell*.....William Anthony

**Second Place**

*Broken but Not Forgotten*.....Danika Curtin

**Honorable Mention**

*Because of One Kiss: A 911 Story..*.....Juliana Rizzitelli

**NONFICTION**

**First Place**

*The Last Time I Went  
To Las Vegas* .....Carmela Orfitelli

**Second Place**

*The Ice-Breaker Question* .....Samhitha Kunichetty

**Honorable Mention**

*I Love You Forever* .....Grace Stauder

**First Place**

**Gumption**

*By Anoushka Mukherjee*

Innocent girls don't stay innocent for long.  
Can you blame them?  
The contorted eyes of society stare in judgment  
since birth.  
"Her nose is too small, skin too dark, eyes too far  
apart."  
"With a face like hers, she won't go too far, this  
one."

A young girl goes down to play in a playground  
full of boys.  
Pushed down, teased, poked with sticks,  
But boys will just be boys,

Tears fill those far apart eyes,  
So she runs to mommy dearest  
"Mommy, mommy, they pushed, teased, shoved"  
The mother giggles, says "no hon, they're just be-  
ing boys."

But one day, they'll realize that life isn't a day at  
the playground.  
They'll realize that one day, those silly little boys  
become, big, strong, men.

“Never walk alone at night, always hold a key in between your middle and ring finger.”

“Don’t wear a skirt too short, and don’t wear too much makeup,  
Because in the mind of men, it’s not who you are,  
it’s what you look like, mommy says.”

But what happens when innocent girls aren’t innocent anymore?

What happens when they’re not the victim of a silly little prank anymore?

What happens when they walk alone at night,  
but the key doesn’t work?

What happens when they go to the police, but no one believes them?

Since the beginning of time, women have been oppressed, misjudged, objectified.

So that when they are paid less than men, it just meant they were lazy; weak.

So that when they create a life, they only get 12 weeks leave.

So that when they finally gain the courage to come forth, their outfit was to blame.

But the thing that people forget, is that the oppressed are not weak

Humility is their strength,

Patience, their weapon. Tears turn to grit

Grit turns to gumption

The innocent girl that once ran to mama,

Doesn’t just cry, but stands up and demands society’s attention.

**Second Place**

**Two Sides, One Glory***By Genesis Jetter*

A desolate flower,  
 Calling out your name.  
 A fight for independence,  
 With the truth.  
 A golden gate,  
 A pure life.  
 A cave of hopelessness,  
 To a flicker of light.  
 Beauty beyond compare,  
 A blinding experience there.  
 A treasured future,  
 More than a spark of faith.  
 Depressed turns to joy,  
 Despair can't stay there.  
 An upside down switch,  
 From this wretched world.  
 Brothers and sisters,  
 United once more.  
 Shadows can't stand his name,  
 And it seems like a good dream.  
 Lightning runs away,  
 It's even afraid.  
 Sin disappeared,  
 Like it never existed.  
 Smiling faces,  
 Laughter so great.  
 A board of your past,  
 Only he holds the future.  
 Praise songs rejoice,  
 All holidays connect.  
 A non forgetting journey.  
 Water as clear as glass,  
 A dove set free.  
 Sheep all are in a pen,  
 And are found again.

A fight to the finish,  
 A war that's now done.  
 Two paints on a canvas,  
 Only room for one.  
 A clash for one castle,  
 A teacher v.s. his student.  
 A world turned evil,  
 The little light is now dark.  
 Hope is not lost,  
 The fire still-flickers.  
 The game has just begun,  
 The light has almost won.  
 All rejoice,  
 When good has won.  
 The battle ends,  
 And the righteous prevail.  
 The darkness finally suffers,  
 No more eternal pain.  
 A race is now over,  
 The 1st place prize is given.  
 Birds fly singing,  
 A little happy tune.  
 "Love almighty, gracious ruler, king of all."  
 Peace is restored,  
 The tale has now ended.  
 The river of life has just begun,  
 A father of his children has won.

**Honorable Mention****The Flower Garden***By Molly Amighi*

The tulip bloomed  
 A pretty pink,  
 The garden lay  
 Behind the rink.

The daisies stood  
 All dressed in white,  
 In the sky  
 A child's kite.

The marigolds,  
 I need not tell,  
 Places all around  
 Where their seeds fell.

The dandelions,  
 Are not a flower,  
 They're springing up  
 After a shower.

The roses sweet  
 The star of the show,  
 The nicest aroma  
 Around where they grow.

A woman came  
 To tend the meadow,  
 The highest praise  
 To her we bestow.

**First Place****Escape from Hell***By William Anthony*

Waking up. Working. Bread. Sleeping. Pain. This was the brutal daily routine at Camp O'Donnell. A place where time lost its meaning. A place where the smell of pain, blood, and death filled the air. A place where fellow Filipino and American POWs groaned around me with every step they took. We worked in ruthless factories or laborious fields for the very people we hated.

At the end of the day, I would retire to my quarters. The quarters weren't much of anything, though. I was packed on a three-foot-across cot, surrounded by the bodies of the men who once served as my brothers in war. The barracks itself was a wooden, run-down facility. Due to the poor condition of the barracks, summer days were scorching. Men suffering from a serious disease, most commonly dysentery, were removed from the barracks, never to be seen again. New POWs took their place.

As a soldier, I served in the 67th Ohio Infantry Division. After three months of fighting, our infantry planned a mini-offensive to flank the left side of a part of the Japanese army. As our squad of 20 moved forward about a mile East, the majority of American troops

retreated from the war-battered town of Bataan in the Philippines. Tens of thousands of us were left behind, including my infantry. We were rounded up, and in teams of about one hundred at a time, were sent out on a march to a camp. Our team was sent out as one of the first. For four days and nights, our infantry endlessly marched in rain and mud, facing numerous hardships. Men dropped to the ground from exhaustion beside me as we trudged onward. Gunshots by the Japanese soldiers guarding us soon accompanied their demise, sucking any remaining life out of them. Of the 110 of us that started on this journey, only 72 survived the march. After the miserable four days, we made it to Camp O'Donnell, which has been my home ever since. From the very beginning, I knew I had to get out. I had to live.

I startled awake in my cot. My back ached from the lack of support the cot offered. I sat up and took in the smell of body odor from the rest of my comrades. We received a shower once a week, and it has been nearly six days since our last one. This week my barracks has been working in the mines, prospecting for coal and other materials that could be useful to the enemy. There was a weekly rotation among our jobs. Each week, individual barracks were assigned one of three jobs: mining, harvesting, or working in a factory. This week my barrack was assigned mining, which was always the worst. Today was the last day of it, and next week we would be assigned harvesting. A guard came in and yelled something unintelligible at us,

probably telling us to get up. Within five minutes, the barracks were evacuated as we headed off to the trucks that would drive us to the mines. We marched about a quarter of a mile into the rising sun until we got to the trucks.

The path was strung with barbed wire so we could not escape. As fifteen of us were jammed into the bed of the truck, we moved along in silence, feeling every bump the gravel road had to offer. After about thirty minutes of traveling, our truck unloaded. We were given our pickaxes and caps and were forced into the mine. The guards stood watch at the top of the entrance as our group lumbered down the mine and began working. We spent hours mindlessly throwing our axes into the stone walls of the mining cavern. Those lucky POWs who did find coal were sent back early to the camp to rest. The mining day typically lasted twelve hours, from 6:00 a.m. to 6:00 p.m., unless you found coal in between that period of time. Lunch was at noon and normally consisted of a morsel of bread and a small bowl of rabbit soup. I took the bread and the repugnant muck of murky grease, broth, and rabbit they called soup. I shoved the dry piece of bread down my throat, and picked at the soup. I pulled out a piece of what looked like the foot of the deceased rabbit and seeing that it still had the hair on it, threw it to the ground.

The remaining hours were uneventful, prisoners thrusting their pickaxes into coarse stone, looking for coal but, for the majority of the time, to no avail. My arms were aching, and the skin on them was raw and covered with

blisters. My body was sweating profusely. When I felt as if I could not go any further, a large whistle pierced through the cave, signifying today's unjustified punishment was over. The prisoners meandered up to the surface where we once again boarded our transports and headed back to camp. The ride back on the trucks was choppy as always. The gates to the camp parted and that is when I noticed a small hole in the fence. The hole was just big enough to fit your arm through and was near the gates. About three hundred yards to the left was a guard tower, and five hundred yards to the right was another. I looked past the area as the truck moved on and saw a two hundred yards of open field. Splotches of grass covered the barren earth, which occupied the rest of the field. About twenty-five yards from the forest and the end of the field, a river ran past the field. That hole was my greatest chance of life beyond the camp. It was my greatest chance of escape.

From there I devised a plan. I sat on a bench outside the barracks and prepared for my escape. Tonight, I would sneak out of the barracks and work my way down to the armory where I would get a knife and a flare gun. With my plan in mind, I waited until evening. I had my dinner, another portion of bread, and didn't eat it. Instead, I stuffed it inside a pocket in my uniform to save for later. I consumed all the water I could to make sure I was as hydrated as possible for my journey ahead.

I went back to the barracks and waited in my cot. As the prisoners beside me drifted off to sleep, I stayed

vigilant. I would not let this opportunity of freedom flee my grasp. At what I thought was midnight, I began my escape. I knew a night watch guard waited outside the barracks and I could not, must not, alarm him. I rose from my cot and looked at the window. The window in our barracks was not what normally comes to mind when one thinks of a window. It was, quite simply, a hole in the wall. I tiptoed across the barracks, adjusting the length of my strides so that I would not step on any other prisoner and draw attention to myself. I made it to the window and gripped the bottom of the wood that formed the lower ledge. Despite intense pain from my blisters, I pulled myself up from the ground and out the window. I slid out, completing the easiest part of the journey that awaited.

The armory was about a half mile across camp. Large beams of lights shone from the guard towers, patrolling for any rogue prisoners. I made my way across the camp toward the armory. I hugged the walls of buildings I passed, to be sure I would not be spotted. After nearly thirty excruciating minutes of crawling, sliding, and inching past buildings, avoiding guards, and staying safe, I reached the back of the armory. A newfound confidence and hope began to rise within me.

I walked forward to the front of the armory where the door was, and right before I turned the corner, I heard a cough. I instinctively turned around, making sure no one followed me. No one was there. Even so, I was sure I heard some noise. I slithered to the edge of the building and

poked my head around the corner. A guard was there, holding a rifle. I quickly stepped back, making sure the guard never saw me. I had not expected this. I did not know someone guarded the armory. However, due to large amounts of army training, I excelled in hand-to-hand combat. I picked up a stick off the ground, and quickly stepping over the edge of the building, threw it over the guard's head. The guard took immediate notice to it and went over to pick it up.

At that exact moment, I struck. I ran over to the guard's position by the door. Hearing the approaching threat, the guard turned around and thrust his rifle straight into my ribcage. A crack of a bone soon followed as pain shot up through my side. He then kicked me in the ribs again, doubling the agony. I fell to the ground, and the guard stood over me, pointing his gun in my face. He slammed his fist into my nose, making it bleed, and turned off the safety on his gun. His finger's whitened around the trigger. At that moment, I raised my leg, and with all my remaining power, kicked the gun, knocking it to the side. I landed a direct blow to his gut, knocking him back and allowing myself to get up. I kicked his groin, making him scream out in pain. I knew this would alert other guards, so I had to act quickly. I grabbed his neck, choking him until he was unconscious. His body fell to the ground, barely alive. I went inside the armory and retrieved a flare gun with three charges and a wire cutter, which was the closest thing to a knife I could find.

With my new supplies, I ran to the fence, which was just one hundred yards from the armory. I loaded the flare gun, and shot it towards the guard tower on the right in an effort to distract the guard. I shot another towards the tower on the right. While the guards were distracted, I took the wire cutter and sliced a hole in the fence wide enough for me to crawl through. I slithered through and started running to the forest, the pain in my ribs growing with every step. About thirty seconds into my sprint, I tripped and landed on the flare gun, releasing another flare deep into the night, drawing attention to myself this time. I got up and ran as hard and as fast as I could to the forest. As I expected, the flare gave away my location, and a few seconds later, a bullet whistled past my ear. The guard towers' lights marked out my body in the grass. I ran harder. I was almost at the forest when a shooting pain shot up through my arm. A bullet had grazed a fleshy part of my arm. I continued running toward the forest, toward safety. Another bullet buzzed right above my head as I made it to the trees.

At last, I escaped. I got to the coastline a day later, walked to the dock, and found two men loading up their small boat with ropes and nets. Fishermen. They no doubt questioned my rugged appearance, but they let me board with a promise to help them with the day's haul. The glimmer of hope I had of escape was finally materializing. I am getting away from this hell. I will survive.

**Second Place**

**Broken but Not Forgotten**

*By Danika Curtin*

Billie Holiday's voice became in sync with the rain's pitter patter against Margie's window. The record player spun the record almost effortlessly as Margie wrote in her diary about the day's events, which did not include much.

Throughout the day all she had done was read and watch out her window for passing cars and walkers. Walkers were rare because she lived on such a busy road but they weren't a completely unordinary sight. There were a few that day, all seemingly normal people but you never know who people really are or the secrets they keep and that's what fascinated Margie.

She liked mysteries and so most of the books she read were in the mystery genre. To most people Margie was a mystery. She didn't have any friends and was known as an outcast in her school. Kids made fun of her because she couldn't keep her head out of a book, and failed to socialize with anyone except when she was forced to by her teachers who claimed they "only wanted to help her make friends." Margie didn't seem to care about the teasing or anything. She didn't let it get to her head.

Just then the closed door cracked open and Margie's mother, Eleanor poked her head in. "Margie dear, your father, sister, and I are going to watch a movie downstairs. Would you care to join us?" Eleanor smiled and opened the door a little more so the top half of her body was visible. She was tall and thin, a pretty woman overall. "She could have been a runway model" was what Margie's father always said.

"No thank you," Margie responded without even glancing up from her diary.

Eleanor stepped inside the room fully. "Are you sure, you never spend time with the family. It would be good-" Eleanor was interrupted.

"I said no, and I am not changing my mind." Margie announced still without even a look at her mother. She preferred to be alone and listen to her record player.

"You never spend any time with the family, all you do is write in that book." Eleanor gestured insultingly towards the book in Margie's hand with a sudden anger and aggression.

"I prefer to be alone so if you would kindly leave my room there is an exit right behind you." Margie motioned to the door that Eleanor was standing in front of but she didn't move.

Eleanor started to raise the volume of her once sweet voice, "I know you like to be alone, all your teachers have informed me of this several times and some say I am a bad parent for letting you be so antisocial your whole life."

Margie scowled, "and you're just going to listen to them rather than your own daughter," she rolled her eyes, "what a great mom you are."

"Don't talk to your mother like that! Maybe I should've never bought that dumb diary in the first place. All it has ever done is caused you to be reclusive and rude." Eleanor had begun to yell. She held her hand out with force and shouted, "Give that to me right now!"

Margie drew back the book in her hand that held all her secrets. She did not want someone to know all the things she thought about everything that happened to her. She did not want someone to have such power over her.

As soon as the record player hit the ground it shattered. Margie scrambled out of her bed, shoving her mother aside and kneeling beside the pieces of broken record and player. Margie couldn't even think of what to say or do. She just sat there holding pieces of the record version of Stormy Weather by Billie Holiday.

Then she realized who had done this. Her own mother,

the one who was trying to take all of her secrets away from her, the one who intended to steal something from her but instead broke one of the most valuable things in Margie's life. She couldn't bear to be near the person who had caused this to happen anymore. So she ran, ran out of her room, ran down the stairs, ran past her concerned family waiting to watch a movie in the living room, ran out of the house and along the cars roaring down the street. Tears ran down her cheeks and mixed with the rain that poured over her head from the dark star filled sky. She just kept running, unsure where she was going, just knowing she wanted to be far away from, well actually she wasn't even sure what she was running from just that she was running.

She didn't stop running until she reached a big tall tree that leaned over her. It was intriguing and she was tired so she told herself to stop for just a moment. She walked over and sat down, leaning so her back of her neck was able to feel the rough bark against her skin. The tree was oddly comforting. As soon as she felt its touch an immediate sense of easement flowed through her, making her almost forget that she was in the act of running away.

Margie looked up and saw the branches of the tree. They were bare and stemmed out from each other. Their positions reminded her of her grandmother's soothing embrace. They surrounded her, moving closer to the point

where they almost were touching her. In normal circumstances this would scare Margie but she wasn't frightened one bit. Instead she held out her hand to touch one of the many branches that were inching closer to her.

As soon as her hand reached one of the many branches a bright light flashed and Margie could not see for a moment or two. Then from the light the silhouette of a person became visible. It was only an outline of a person but Margie knew who it was right away. How could she forget the person she loved so dearly, her grandmother. But this was impossible. Her grandmother had died a few years ago. She wasn't in the room with her, only her mother was but she knew she had died. Her mother cried when she told Margie the news. There is no way she was still alive. The figure didn't seem alive, but she seemed present.

"Go home Margie." A small whisper crept into Margie's ear. "Your family loves you very much." The figure stepped closer and became a little clearer.

"Grandmother? Is that you, how are you here?" Margie questioned. She squinted to make out some of her grandmother's features.

"That doesn't matter right now. What matters is that you go home to your family. "The voice was louder and sounded serious.

But mother broke your record player, It was the only thing I had left of you." Margie protested. She didn't see why her grandmother was on her mom's side when she had broken her belongings.

"I will always be with you, not through a record player but by memories we share. Your mom just wanted to help." The voice replied.

"How was she trying to help, all she wanted to do was steal my diary to read my secrets!" Margie argued. She was getting angry at the fact that her grandmother didn't see things the way she did. Even though she always thought they were so alike.

"She's worried about you, all she wants is the best for you. Never forget that she loves you." The figure stepped back and it became less clear to Margie.

"Wait please don't leave I didn't get a chance t-" before Margie could finish her sentence the tree branch let go of Margie and another big flash of light blinded her for a moment.

Then she was gone. Like she was never there in the first place. But she was, or at least Margie thought so. She was so vivid, not like a hallucination. Either way she needed to get home to her mother so she wasn't too worried about her.

Margie stood up from the tree, sad to be leaving it behind. She didn't think it would be the last time she would ever see it though. She started to run under the pitch black star speckled sky. The rain had slowed but not completely. Little raindrops drizzled over her face, feeling one or two of them at a time.

Once she reached the house her mother was standing on the front porch step with her phone in her hand. She was talking frantically but once she spotted Margie she looked so relieved.

"Oh, nevermind officer, I found her, yes, thank you, bye," Eleanor said trying to hang up as quickly as possible while trying to make her way towards Margie. She lunged towards her and scooped her up in a big hug. "You had us worried sick . I almost sent the police looking for you. Where did you go?" She couldn't stop asking questions while smothering Margie in her hug.

"I'm sorry mom. I wasn't thinking right in the moment." Margie didn't tell her mother about seeing her grandmother by the tree.

"I'm sorry too Margie, I know it was the only thing you had left of her." Eleanor pulled Margie back to look at her and she saw how sorry she truly was.

"She will always be with us, not through a record player but

by memories we share." Margie had remembered what her grandmother had said. She thought her mother could use these words just as much as Margie could.

"That's a very wise thing to say Margie, I'm proud of you." Eleanor smiled and kissed her forehead.

"Can we go now mom, and watch a movie?" Margie asked

"Of course we can, I hope the popcorn isn't cold." Margie's mom laughed, and so did Margie. With their arms around each other they made their way into the living room, and Margie knew her grandmother was there too.

## Honorable Mention

### Because of One Kiss: A 911 Story

*By Juliana Rizzitelli*

The breeze whipped my long, wispy, blonde hair in front of my eyes. Michael looked down at me, his piercing blue eyes resembling the sky above. He gently brushed the hair off my face, and I let his smile sink in. I had only known him for just over a year now, but he was everything I ever dreamed of as a child: his hair, his voice, everything. He was perfect.

He ran his fingers through my hair. I leaned in, resting my head on his shoulder. Another autumn breeze came through, sending a chill down my spine.

“Fall came up on us like a tiger this year,” he said, chuckling to himself. “Sneaking up on us, waiting for the perfect moment to catch us in its cold hands and never let go!” I squealed as he started to tickle me, his firm grip holding me tightly. We started to laugh, and, like every time he laughed, his hair swept over his eyes in the most dreamlike way. I sighed happily, wishing this could last forever.

“Yeah, I kind of miss summer, too,” I said. Mimi lives in Canada, so my parents, little brother, and I visit her every summer. I always love the week I spend with her. I told her about Michael, and she told me that he must be the luckiest man alive to be my boyfriend.

That’s when it actually struck me.

Something had definitely grown between us. We were spending hours together, and when we weren’t together, we spent hours on the phone. He had started calling me his “baby” and “sweetie pie” and all, which is totally fine with me. I’d kind of kept it secret, but it dawned on me that I was waiting desperately for the day he kissed me...

I snuggled into Michael’s arms and forgot about everything else. I was praying silently that before we parted, I had experienced that one kiss. Just one. That’s all I wanted. I had brought some chapstick in case. I quickly smeared some on and sat up, facing his radiant face. He smiled at me and looked up at the morning sky.

Suddenly, he broke his gaze from the sunrise. We locked eyes. I could sense he wanted something. *Please, please kiss me*, I repeated desperately in my head. Then, as if he could read my thoughts, he gently raised his hand to my chin and lifted it to his face. He began to lean in, and I puckered my lips as my heart began to beat faster.

*This is it!*, I said to myself. *He’s actually going to kiss you!*

But suddenly, he stopped about three inches from me. Something was vibrating in his pocket: his phone. We awkwardly broke apart as he grabbed his phone. I became obsessed with my white Converse so I wouldn’t have to talk to him about how weird that had been.

His mom had called him. She was at work and had

forgotten her briefcase. Apparently she was already late, so she asked if he could run it to her.

“Sorry, sweets, gotta run,” he said after he hung up.

“Mom’s work is about an hour away from here. See you later, though?”

“Yeah, sure Mike.”

“Text me later, Emmy!” he called as he headed for the gate of the park. *So close... so close...* I kept thinking as I grabbed my backpack and headed for school. I checked my phone. *I’ll be there in five minutes, just in time for first period*, I thought. Just to double check, I looked at my phone. It was 7:45 AM on September 11, 2001.

\* \* \*

We were sitting in bio, my brain aching to text Michael. We go to the same school, and we normally have bio together. My teacher was explaining a cycle of some animal, but I wasn’t paying attention. I knew his mom worked in the Twin Towers, and it was pretty far from our high school. But it was 8:30, and he hadn’t even texted me a heart. Not even one! I was debating on pulling out my phone when the bell rang. Thank goodness! I’m free!

I grabbed my books and ran out of the classroom. My first stop was the bathroom. But as I made my way through the crowded halls, I heard someone say something happened to the Twin Towers. Something about a crash. My stomach plummeted. Where was Michael? I

asked him where he was, but I didn’t get any response. I started to panic, but caught myself. *This is probably all a rumor, Em*, I told myself. *Stop worrying, he’s fine.*

An announcement came over the loudspeakers as soon as I left the bathroom. “Teachers, please turn on your classroom TVs. Thank you.”

Well that was weird. We never used our class TVs. As I sat down in geometry, I heard a group of guys talking about someone’s dad being killed in the Twin Towers and the kid had to leave. My heart began to pound again. This was the second time I heard something like this in five minutes. I broke into a cold sweat as my teacher turned on the TV.

Immediately, an fiery image flashed across the screen. The Twin Towers were collapsing, and from what we could see, a plane had crashed into the towers. I caught pieces of what the reporter said, like “was hit at 8:46 this morning” and “many people have already been found dead,” but I had stopped watching. I was in shock, speechless from horror. Michael couldn’t be... Could he? No, He wasn’t...

I excused myself from class and ran out the building. *I had to find him!* Mandy, one of my friends from geometry, followed me. “Emerson, wait!”

I ignored her. I had yanked the car door open and put the key in the ignition before she caught up with me. Panting, she held my door open and said, “Calm down, Em. What’s wrong? Where are you going?”

“Nothing,” I told her through gritted teeth and wiping the tears streaming down my face. “I’m leaving.”

I pulled away with a sudden jolt, the door still hanging open.

Mary was stunned as I grabbed at the door as I pulled away to the main road. I had to get to Michael. He couldn’t be gone. He just couldn’t.

\* \* \*

The highway was standstill. I still had a few miles between the exit, so I had to wait it out nervously checking my phone for texts. Nothing.

I nervously passed the time by watching the clock. Soon it was 9:10, 9:20, 9:30. My only thoughts were on Michael. Where was he? Was he okay? Was his mom okay? Who was dead? And who in their right mind would fly a plane into the Twin Towers?

After what seemed like forever, I got off the exit and confronted one of the most horrifying scenes of my life. The Twin Towers were engulfed in flames, firemen and police officers left and right, sirens blaring through the streets, men, women, and children weeping, and screams echoing that will haunt me forever. I couldn’t take it. I broke down on the spot, watching the fire eat the towers.

I collected my thoughts and emotions and marched over to the site. It was horrible, and I’ll save you the details. My only thought was to find the familiar brown hair and joyous face in this scene of terror.

But he was nowhere to be seen. He wasn’t at the

entrance, the rubble, even with the firemen helping save people. I swayed nervously as crowds gathered around the buildings. Then, it all went black. I was falling deeper and deeper, until there was nothing left.

\* \* \*

I woke up with a start. Where was I? What happened? But it all flooded back: the fire, the towers, Michael. The crowds had left, so there were only about 200 people left, mostly rescue team members. I jumped up and scanned around. There was a thick dust around the buildings, so I couldn’t see much, but I screamed desperately as I ran around.

“Michael? Michael! MICHAEL!”

I stopped dead. He was there, at my feet. He was laying there, eyes closed, his left arm burned badly, and blood covering his head and shirt. I dropped to my knees and cried helplessly as the world around me seemed to crash. This was my worst nightmare come true.

As I cried, a worker came by and tried to pull me away. I ignored him completely, laying across Michael and soaking him in tears. The man gave up and walked away.

Suddenly, out of nowhere, I heard someone say my name. It was almost a whisper, quiet like the wind.

“Em? Is that you?”

I glanced around, searching for the voice’s owner. But then it hit me: I knew that voice!

But how could it be? I looked down and screamed.

“Michael!” I cried at the top of my lungs. I clutched him in my arms as he sat up and hugged me back. I couldn’t resist it any longer. I had waited over a year for this. I grabbed him around the back of the head and smacked my lips onto his. He played it off well, as if he’d anticipated my response before he sat up.

We just sat there for a while, hugging and kissing, then hugging and kissing again. It lasted forever, just as I hoped. Thousands of families had lost loved ones, but I had everything that mattered to me, and I didn’t care for anything else.

We sat in the midst of the hideous event, just explaining our sides of the story.

Apparently Michael found out of the terrorism before I did, so he sped over to help his mom. He ran in, but was engulfed in flames. He said something hit him in the head, and he was down from then on. I explained my story: school, the TVs, and Mandy. After a while, we just sat there.

Eventually, a paramedic came over and helped Michael stand up. They took him away in an ambulance. I knew that I had just survived one of the most drastic events in history. And knowing Michael was alive was all it took to make me smile as I watched the white truck bring him to the hospital to be sure he was alright.

But I already knew he was. Because of one kiss.

## First Place

### The Last Time I Went to Las Vegas

*By Carmela Orfitelli*

We drove along the rocky roads of a gorgeous desert in Nevada. Huge mountains rose above our white rental car. *This desert will never end will it?* I thought to myself. *We’ve been driving for hours.* I stared out of my window at the dry bushes and cacti. “Five more minutes until we get to Las Vegas!” Grandpa exclaimed relieved. I peeked up immediately and sat up straight in my seat, *finally! I can’t wait to see our last hotel!* I thought to myself. The thought of it being the last hotel made me sad after we had been on a vacation for four weeks and had seen seven amazing states. I contently searched out my window waiting to see the silvery buildings of Las Vegas.

In a couple of minutes we were driving through a bustling city - limousines went by with their tinted windows, tall and shiny buildings comprised mostly of glass and mirror surrounded us. And people. Millions of all sorts of different people were walking.

We were driving along the busy, traffic-filled road when Francesca my little sister asked Gigi, “What hotel are we staying at?”

“The Aria” Gigi responded quickly,

“Show me! Show me!”

Grandpa pointed left at our hotel, the Aria, “That one.”

“That one?!?” Francesca asked pointing at the Bellagio,

“No, that’s the Bellagio that one,” Grandpa pointed again,

“That one?!?” Francesca asked pointing to the Flamingo,

“No-just-stop-no-just-just-just wait.” I stuttered annoyedly.

“Jeez,” Francesca said back, “ You don’t have to be such a grump.”

“We’re here!” Gigi announced. We pulled into a circular driveway that had a water fountain in the center that made sparkling patterns that jumped into the sky and fell gracefully back into the clear pool. A man in a gray suit with a light purple undershirt and a bow tie strode over to our car, Grandpa rolled down the window,

“May I take your bags to your room?” The man asked politely,

“Certainly,” Grandpa responded. We got out of our car and stretched,

“Goodbye rental car, you have driven us across the country, farewell, good friend.” I said in my best English accent, (Which is pretty bad ).

I strolled over to Francesca by the huge waterfall that had waves of water rippling down it’s black surface.

Francesca was reaching over some flowers and touching the waterfall.

“Stop it Chess.” I batted her hand,

“You’re not the boss of me” She retorted,

“Stop Francesca!” I shouted,

“*Stop Francesca,*” she mimicked,

“Fine, I’ll just go tell Gigi then..” I started to walk away.

“No! Please! I’ll be good! I promise!” Francesca pleaded. *Why do I let her get away with this stuff?* I thought to myself, but I didn’t tell on her.

I wandered around looking at the beautiful entryway.

There were two seats shaped like doves made of pebbles cemented together, there were bronze statues of dragons and goddesses and giant marble pillars reaching towards the white roof that covered us from the sunlight. It provided some coolness in the 120 degree weather. In the shade it was about 100 degrees. It looked so amazing, but this wasn’t even the inside. I stared at the golden rimmed glass doors that led to the inside of our last hotel.. And air conditioning.

“Hello! Carmela!” Gigi was beckoning for me to come,

“GET YOUR BUTT OVER HERE!” Francesca shouted jokingly.

I jogged over to them waiting in front of the door. Francesca opened it and we followed her inside. I closed my eyes as a wave of air conditioning washed over me. “Ahhh.”

When I opened my eyes and saw a ginormous room full of thousands of colors, restaurants, and people. There were slot machines that shone colorful red, green, white and blue tints over people's faces.

Where the white tile we were standing on faded into a scarlet rug, there was a big sign that said, "NO PERSONS UNDER 21 YEARS OF AGE ALLOWED" Grandpa and Gigi headed towards a desk with a label above it that read in grey letters, "Check in." We waited in a short line and soon we got to the desk.

Gigi and Grandpa filled out an online form and got a folder that had, the key, the room number (11276), a map and the WiFi password (A very critical part).

We headed towards the elevators where there was a man in a suit and sunglasses. Grandpa showed the man the key and he nodded. We went into the elevator and scanned our key so we could press the button labeled, 11.

Once we reached our floor, me and Francesca raced down the corridor until it split in two, then we waited for Gigi and Grandpa so we knew we were going the right way.

"Which way Grandpa?"

"That way." Grandpa pointed left.

We continued racing until we got to room 11276.

"Who's turn is it to open it?" Grandpa asked,

"Mine!" I shouted triumphantly,

"Yeah, but I get to look inside first, I get to-" I ignored Francesca and opened the door.

*Woah*, I thought to myself.

The curtains started opening ON THEIR OWN once we walked inside. The room was very contemporary looking. It had a HUGE bathroom with a bathtub and a shower, both separate. It had white beds with blue decoration pillows and where the curtains were was a glass wall that overlooked Las Vegas. There were brown comfy chairs and a wooden table and a TV, "Wow." I gasped "This is the best hotel yet." I jumped onto the bed on the right side and exclaimed,

"The side near the desk is mine!"

"Whatever, I get the window anyways." Francesca retorted.

Gigi threw my favorite stuffed animal to me and I clutched her tightly. I got her three years ago for my eighth birthday. Her name is Lindi.

Gigi and Grandpa started unpacking. After they finished, they exclaimed, "Let's go get lunch!"

As we walked in I took in the beauty of this restaurant. There were hundreds of tables, a glass wall that showed the check in area where dozens of people were driving in, and teal tinted large glass crystals everywhere. A waitress holding four menus asked us, "Table for four?"

"Yes," Grandpa said,

"Right this way." The waitress started walking. We sat down at a booth and she handed us our menus, "I'll be back in a minute for your drinks." I peered down at the menu. I didn't see anything I thought I would like

until I saw the chicken and waffles. *The chicken and waffles look good*, I thought to myself, *I think I'll have that*.

“What do you think you’re going to get?” Asked Gigi,

“I think I’m going to get the chicken and waffles.” I replied,

“Me too!” Francesca exclaimed.

The waitress came back with a water pitcher and poured us glasses of water. “Anything else to drink?” Asked the waitress who had set the pitcher down on our table and was now holding a pad and pen. “Coffee for us,” Gigi said pointing back and forth between her and Grandpa. “Were good.” I replied for me and Francesca. I took a sip of water, eating some of the ice in the process.

“Are you guys ready to order?” The waitress asked, “I think so,” Grandpa looked at us, we nodded.

“What would you like sir?”

“I’ll take the Pancake Special.” “And you ma’am?”

“I’ll have the French Toast,” Gigi never really eats a lot,

“And you sweetie?” The lady asked sweetly to Francesca

“I’ll have the Chicken and Waffles please.” Francesca answered in her cute baby voice that she uses when talking to strangers, especially waitresses,

“And you?”

“I’ll have the same thing as her.” I responded pointing to Francesca.

“Ok I’ll go put that in.” The lady walked briskly away. We chatted about the trip so far and our favorite places and what we were going to do in the remaining two days. We looked at the dessert menu ( Which had a delicious sounding devils food cake on it ).

Finally the food and it looked delicious. There were three boneless chicken tenders on top of a huge waffle that said “*Aria*” in the middle of it.

“This is the best meal I’ve ever had!” I exclaimed,

“It’s soooo good.” added Francesca with her mouth full,

“Don’t talk with your mouth full.” I demanded,

“You don’t control me.”

We all ate ravenously and very quickly. There was so much food that *I* didn’t even finish.

We paid the bill and headed out.

“Have a nice day!” The waitress said waving,

“You too!” We waved back.

After we ate we went back into our room and played on our Ipads for a little bit while Gigi and Grandpa unpacked a bit more. At around five-ish We decided to go get some dinner. “Let’s go to the rainforest café!” Francesca suggested,

“We’re going there tomorrow, we had a big lunch so we probably shouldn’t eat too much.” Gigi pointed out,

“Ok.” We said.

We walked down the busy streets which were lined with perfectly trimmed bushes. There were speakers

lining the streets so we danced all the way to a huge complex that had many stores and restaurants in it including a McDonald's and a Rainforest Café. We decided to go to McDonald's and got in the long line that lead all the way up to the counter.

This McDonald's was so huge that it had two floors! Once we got to the counter we ordered our food and sat at a table near the door. We waited for about ten minutes and they called our number, "Number six five six! One plain burger, one buttermilk chicken and two Happy Meals!"

We filled our drink cups and sat down to eat. It was delicious, I had a six-piece McNugget with a go-gurt and Francesca had a four-piece McNugget with apple slices, "This is SOOOOOO good," Francesca said, I laughed,

"Francesca, it's McDonald's, it's always good."

"I know but this time it was EXTRA good." *Really Francesca?* I thought to myself, laughing silently. It was starting to get dark out when we started dancing down the street again.

Our legs were exhausted and our eyelids were heavy once we got back to our hotel. Francesca and I were so tired we couldn't even race down the hallway. We just walked inside and immediately got ready for bed so we could sleep.

I was looking out the window and thought to myself, *this could be the last time I see Las Vegas, I need to enjoy this trip as much as possible.* I squeezed

Lindi as if it were going to be the last time I saw her. Then I realized that in just four days I was going to a new school! *What if I'm bullied? What if I don't fit in? What if everyone ignores me? What if my old friends make new friends and forget about me?* The thoughts were endless. But, finally, I pulled up the covers, closed my eyes and started drifting to sleep.

Fast forward two weeks, I am in my new school and everything is awesome! So far I have three friends named Emily, Norah and Natalie! Everyone is so friendly and there don't seem to be any bullies! Also, I have a really nice teacher named Mrs. Yerke, she is so funny and always has a smile on her face. I can tell this is going to be a superb year!

This was the day I realized that you're only young once and that you need to live life to the fullest.

## Second Place

### The Ice-Breaker Question

*By Samhitha Kunichetty*

We all know those cliché, ice-breaker questions. Those first day of school questions so everyone gets to know you, the ones I despise. Especially that one notoriously famous question: What do you want to be when you grow up? Now although I've answered this question many times before, the true answer is I don't know. I'm a child and I don't want to worry about what I'm doing 10 years from now. Nevertheless, I do know that I want a job that uses one of my three interests: coding, biology, and Geography.

As I grow up, I'm surrounded by software engineers. My mom is a software engineer, my dad is a software engineer, and even my brother is going to study software engineering. They've introduced me to coding and I'm enjoying it very much. My parents also introduced me to S.T.E.M: science, technology, engineering, and math. When I was younger, I would go to S.T.E.M activities in my neighborhood all the all the time. I specifically remember that there was a S.T.E.M festival in my neighborhood. So my mom brought my brother, my friend, and I to the festival. I still remember when my family and I visited Washington D.C, my parents brought my brother and I to the National Air and Space museum, one of my favorite trips to date.

My love for the health field started when I was little. When I was four years old, I wanted to become a dentist. Mostly because my dentist at that time was really nice, and I wanted to be like that. Also because she loved the color pink, just like me. Slowly, my love for the health field faded away until it was brought back up this school year, in the beginning of seventh grade. We had started beginner's biology and I had found a love for biology like never before. I think that if I'm going to choose a job in the future, it's got to have biology in it.

I cannot get enough of geography, learning about the diversity in the ideas and cultures that span our world. It all started when I was six years old, when my mom downloaded an geography app for me. At that time, my mom downloaded educational games for me all the time, so it was not uncommon. Nonetheless, as a curious six year old, I clicked on the app. I clicked on the globe and I was immediately hooked. I was able to click on a country and it would say the country, the capital, the currency, the population, the language and the flag. The app had flag quizzes, capital quizzes, and puzzles to put the country in its place on the continent. This might sound pretty boring for some people, but I loved it. I would get a stamp on a "passport" and a sticker on a suitcase based on the country. And I have a very competitive nature and I'm a perfectionist, so I had an urge to get everything right. So I ended up playing that game daily for almost two years. And with that came remembering facts that the average six or seven year old

wouldn't know, such as the capital of Micronesia or the flag of Mozambique. My family, geographic buffs themselves, always bought it up during family dinner, excitedly talking about history and current political issues. I was always listening, intrigued. Even now I still love geography. Soon, I am going to go to the Connecticut State Geography Bee. And my knowledge still shocks me in surprise, when I see a flag and automatically remember that it is the Marshall Island flag, all from memory.

I mean now, I guess I do have an answer for you. When I grow up, I know I want a job that uses one or all of my three interests: Coding, biology, and geography.

## Honorable Mention

### I Love You Forever

*By Grace Stauder*

I love you. Three simple words that you say all the time to your parents, sibling, and friends. But have you ever thought about what those words mean to the person you say them to or what those words mean to you. I never did. I learned what those words meant to me three summers ago. During the summer I love to relax and have fun with my family and friends. But that summer was different. That summer I learned what "I love you" means the hard way.

My dad was diagnosed with throat cancer in May of 2017 when I was 11-years-old. It was a shock to everyone. He went to the doctor everyday with my mom deciding the best options for treatment. My parents, and the countless doctors and professionals they visited, decided that surgery was the best option. When my dad went into surgery, it felt like a normal day. I went to school, as did my sisters. After school, we went to swim practice that night like usual. When we came home that day, though, everyone's responsibilities had grown, mine, my sisters' and especially my mom's. She did the work of two parents and accepted the responsibilities with vigor and strength.

After my dad was discharged from the hospital, things had changed. My dad spent day after day at home or driving to his treatment in the city with my mom, leaving

before I even woke up in the morning. During this my respect for my parents increased not only because of their perseverance through this hard time, but also their sacrifices for each other and for my sisters and me. I learned to get along with my sisters better and be responsible at home.

I love you. I said that phrase more in the time my dad was sick than any other time in my life. During this time of struggle and growth, I learned what love means to me. Love is the never ending journey that you have with someone in which you will cry and laugh, smile and frown, give and receive, win and lose, but never ever let go of the ones who stuck with you through it all. Love should always be cherished no matter who it is. So, everyday, though it might not be expressed verbally, I say to my parents and my sisters, "I love you forever."

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LITERARY COMPETITION WINNERS 2019

GRADES 9-12

**POETRY**

**First Place**

*Smoke* ..... Cassandra Popick

**Second Place**

*The Pursuit of the Yellow Swing*..... Deanna Maltese

**Honorable Mention**

*September Nights* ..... Alyssa Meyers

**FICTION**

**First Place**

*The Wandering Isle* ..... Penny Druan

**Second Place**

*Admissions Game* ..... Catherine White

**Honorable Mention**

*The Other Half of the Story* ..... Penny Duran

**NONFICTION**

**First Place**

*Life's Merry-go-round* ..... Penny Duran

**Second Place**

*The Gold Medal* ..... Madison SantaBarbara

**Honorable Mention**

*How My Darkness Led Me to a Greater Purpose* ..... Katie Stalling

**First Place**

**Smoke**

*By Cassandra Popick*

15:13).  
 (John  
 One's friends"  
 Life for  
 Down one's  
 To lay  
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 the blue sky.  
 Smoke filled  
 With fire quickly as  
 The house filled

Smoke

**Second Place**

**The Pursuit of the Yellow Swing**

*By Deanna Maltese*

Sometimes the world gets too loud  
 And I feel trapped inside four walls of negativity  
 Isn't the world beautiful?  
 Aren't there good things to be found?  
 But instead we drown in overwhelming pain

I have this desire to escape  
 The world is so much bigger than we see  
 All you have to do is stand outside  
 So that's what I do

Step by step the soft ground passes underneath my feet  
 Reaching my yellow swing  
 And as I sit, I look up at the sky  
 Look at the blue, and the way the clouds float by  
 Never stopping, always going

It's not plagued by the walls we build in our mind  
 Of all the worries, stress and overwhelming fears  
 I close my eyes and breathe  
 Breathe in the air that renews my lungs

The sun breaks through the cracks in the trees  
 Trees bare, missing the rustle of leaves  
 Winter not quite gone, but still known  
 Spring light, mixed with cool air  
 And the slight breeze that chills you to perfection

No phone to be found  
 I sway back and forth, my hair falling into my face  
 A silence that allows you to hear the thoughts in your  
 head  
 A peace that comes from knowing the world is bigger  
 than your worries

It's not plagued by the walls we build in our mind  
 Of all the worries, stress and overwhelming fears  
 I close my eyes and breathe  
 Breathe in the air that renews my lungs

The sun breaks through the cracks in the trees  
 Trees bare, missing the rustle of leaves  
 Winter not quite gone, but still known  
 Spring light, mixed with cool air  
 And the slight breeze that chills you to perfection

No phone to be found  
 I sway back and forth, my hair falling into my face  
 A silence that allows you to hear the thoughts in your  
 head  
 A peace that comes from knowing the world is bigger  
 than your worries

It was there in the early years for laughter  
 For the climbing practice, and raw hands from hanging  
 upside down  
 For the races down the long yellow slide, and getting diz-  
 zy in the tire swing  
 For the way we imagined and dreamed

And after many years of being forgotten, I find myself  
 walking towards that swing, my swing

My yellow swing, that sits in the middle between one  
that's red and one that's blue

And it shows me a world I've forgotten

One of nature, one of God, and one of innocence

Because in the end we all need that yellow swing

## Honorable Mention

### September Nights

*By Alyssa Meyers*

cool autumn air.  
warm water up to my ribcage.  
chills moving down my spine.  
hair sticking to my neck.  
hands brushing underwater.  
blue light illuminating our faces from below.  
water splashing softly around us.  
feeling the sting of carbonation as I suck down soda.  
a soft current on the small of my back.  
fingers looking more like prunes than phalanges.  
the familiar smell of chlorine as I bow my head laughing.  
lingering tastes of soda cut with the taste of chlorine as I  
open my mouth.  
snapping my head back to look at rustling leaves above.  
moving my focus to the clouds traveling the dark sky.  
being pulled back to reality with a cat rubbing against me.  
its orange fur clinging to my shoulders.  
it struts around the hot tub before scampering away.  
i rest my head on the edge of the tub and smell the sweet  
soil with every inhalation.  
someone taps my shoulder gently as I sit up straight.  
water drops weighing down my eyelids makes this feel like  
a dream.  
somebody leans in to tell me a secret.  
i smell peppermint on their breath.  
as they whisper, the wind burns the tip of my nose and the  
tops of my cheeks.  
over in the corner of the yard,  
somebody has started a fire in the fireplace to warm them-  
selves up.  
the orange glow the fire possesses is a stark contrast to the  
blue of the water.

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a gentle breeze carries the smoky aroma over to us.  
the scene fades into black with the buzz of chatter.  
i close my eyes, savoring every detail of this moment.

**First Place****The Wandering Isle***By Penny Duran*

She raced through the night and across the forest floor wet with the rain from earlier that afternoon. Her long black hair framed her porcelain face, which smooth and radiant as the moon above her, perfectly reflected the night sky. She grimaced as a jagged stone sliced the sole of her foot, forcing her to a halt. Tears of anger trickled down her face, as she took her sturdy bow in hand and intertwined her long and elegant fingers around the arrow. Taking aim at a small laurel tree at the other end of the clearing, she stared at her hands in disgust. They reminded her of her father's words.

"Delia, you have a musician's hands. You should be playing the harp, instead of condemning your beautiful palms to such crude activities," he had sighed with frustration, for he had hoped that his daughter would follow the path of the lyrical Apollo. Much to his dismay, Delia was entranced by the god's rebellious twin.

Under her breath, Delia cursed the injustice of his attempts to enslave her as a domestic captive, while allowing her brothers to do as they pleased. "He hadn't given second thought about throwing the bow we carved together into the raging fireplace," she grunted as her fingers brushed over her prized possession's uneven charcoal surface.

Suddenly Delia spotted a bright gleam from behind

the gilded trees, and she carefully rose with her weapon in hand, oblivious to the rivulets of blood flowing from her foot. As she slowly glided beneath the green canopy, a brilliant silver stag emerged, shining a thousand times brighter than the countless diamonds beaming overhead. Finally – a chance! If she brought home such a prize, her father would be unable to deny her talent as an archer. She could envision the head hanging above the mantle and her father extolling with pride to guests the prowess of his huntress daughter.

Delia drew her arm back with calculated precision. Yet, as soon as the silver stag sighted the glint of the arrowhead in the moonlight, her efforts were in vain. The creature dashed away as quickly and as gracefully as the wind that brushed through the crowns of leaves. Fuelled by her ambition, Delia dashed through the woods ignoring the forest refuse that pierced her feet. Thorns snagged the pale skin of her arms, but she only focused on her quarry. She was determined to make her father proud.

As the trees before her and the racing stag knitted together into an impenetrable forest corral, Delia's wild heart pounded. With the stag trapped, a smile began to dance upon Delia's lips.

Once the arrow had escaped her hands, the shaft's

long body took an abrupt and impossible turn towards the right when it should have flown straight to its target. How was this possible when the wind was barely even blowing through the trees? As Delia stood there paralyzed by shock, the silver stag seized the opportunity and vanished into the woods.

Heartbroken and exhausted, Delia collapsed to the ground. She had failed to fulfill her righteous quest, and her father's respect remained elusive. Sighing, she grabbed a wayward branch to raise herself from the ground. Even if the quest had ended miserably, she would at least retrieve the arrow.

She set off in the misguided direction of her arrow, but as she walked endlessly farther, she began to doubt her judgment. Just as she was to turn and search in the opposite direction, she spotted her arrow at the edge of forest, where the moon appeared to glisten on the sand. As she exited the forest and out across the muted beach, she questioned how her arrow could have flown so far. She might be talented with a bow, but her arrow being able to reach the sea bordered the line of fantasy.

As she bent down to retrieve her arrow, she spotted a flash of silver from the corner of her eye. The stag appeared to float upon the water like an iceberg at sea. Her sense of melancholy melted, and her heart reignited with hope. Adrenaline provided her strength and encouragement as she raced into the icy current. Every single breath, ever single step, was a great challenge as she observed

the stag racing across the water toward a distant isle. The waves seemed to solidify beneath its hooves.

As the waters grew deeper, Delia was forced to submerge her face, and her lips became the color of the sea. She considered turning back. “What am I thinking? I’ll never catch the stag. With every step I take it only seems to be getting farther away,” she lamented.

As her limp body rolled onto the once distant shore, a disembodied laugh escaped her throat. Chills raced across her wounded arms as she reached for her quiver and discovered that it was empty. She wanted to let out a pained and hopeless cry but refrained. Instead she searched the shore for branches and stones to forge new arrows.

With a new sense of purpose, Delia wandered the isle both peculiar and enchanting. It appeared as if the island was floating, or rather wandering, thereby distancing itself farther from the woods which each passing second. As unlikely as it was, Delia liked to think that she was standing upon a *wandering isle*, for she liked the thought of being untethered like a tree without roots. Maybe Delia by extension was no longer anchored.

Thoughts of ancient legends passed through her head. As she summited a hill, she recalled how Artemis and Apollo had been born on a floating island to escape Hera’s wrath.

A familiar metallic glow caught her eye, but as she turned, she saw that the creature was no longer alone. A

Delia had stepped closer, she was met by a divine, radiant visage. Not a touch of faux finery graced the hypnotizing figure, just a simple yet elegant face framed by glossy auburn waves. She dismounted her steed with the grace of a dancer, and her steps were so light that she was floating rather than walking. Delia’s heart grew wings while she basked in the light of the mesmerizing figure.

#

As Apollo mounted his golden chariot, rode across the heavens and brought an end to his sister’s nightly reign, Delia awoke to the chorus of clanking pots and morning preparations. She bolted from bed, feeling reborn as her new sense of purpose consumed her. She strode out into the world, seeking an audience with her father to lobby her cause. The fierce goddess of the hunt not only guided her to the wandering isle but toward her salvation.

**Second Place**

**Admissions Game**
*By Catherine White*

Once upon a time a group of young princes and princesses felt obliged to compete with one another, somewhat begrudgingly, to become the Chosen One. This wasn't an actual title, but rather a name they coined amongst themselves, like how scientists name diseases, conveying a tiny pinch of excitement, great caution, and a bit of fear. The coveted acceptance letter to the highly-selective Castle College would ultimately bestow the "Chosen One" title only on the most blessed pupil. Each prince and princess was acting in a most unregal-like behavior, bouncing and jittering in anticipation of that beautiful letter in the big envelope. They were assured, and they believed, that an acceptance letter to such an esteemed institution would be theirs if only they exchanged sleep for endless hours of studying to receive high marks and test scores -- a reasonable tradeoff, as well as possessing a dash of character for good measure. Surely, only the most worthy and qualified pupils could ever possibly get in, right? Well, perhaps. That should be the case. But as they studied the past crops of "Chosen Ones", they became increasingly suspicious of a frustrating likelihood, "Could a bunch of students have been accepted without studying, or, God forbid, while also getting a full eight hours of sleep?"

"I hope they will base the acceptance off of our grades and test scores like our tutors told us," said Princess Athena, a surprise to literally no one since she was always top of the class. "I mean, why wouldn't they pick the best and brightest students?"

Another student, Prince Chance, noticed people glancing over at him. Academically, everyone knew he struggled. It didn't worry him a bit though. After all, he was always told that Castle College viewed the pupils 'holistically.' He was pretty religious so he wasn't too worried about that. about that. Besides, he considered himself a cool and popular prince and was certain that would count in his favor, certainly as much as Athena's grades that she slaved over day and night.

Chance piped up and said, "I'm sure your high test scores count for something, but I've heard that the Castle College favors athletics and extra-curriculars. I'm not worried since I showed up to at least the first meeting of nearly every club around, plus my parents sent Castle College pictures of me sword fighting!"

Athena was taken aback, horrified really, by what he just told her. "Chance!" she exclaimed loudly, "You aren't even on the sword fighting team! The Castle College admission team is too meticulous and renowned to ever fall for a crazy doctored picture. That may actually hurt your chances to become the Chosen One."

Chance didn't respond. He knew that the pictures could only help him since that was how his Aunt Becky got into Castle College. Rather he argued, "But there are my countless clubs too. That will strengthen my resume!" "You barely show up to most of those clubs," said Athena, feeling personally insulted. "I may not be signed up for as many clubs as you, but for those I participate in, I actually have official roles." Chance looked down, indicating that he did not agree. After all, quantity must be better than quality for a resume, right? Who would ever find out if he was a legitimate team or club member? He liked Athena, but he got so aggravated that she was such a stickler for honesty and integrity. In the cut-throat world of education, where has that ever gotten anyone anyway?

"Well," thought Chance, "Why shouldn't that be the case? Castle College will want to accept students who have the 'right look.'" This thought comforted him as he was always being told, especially by his mother, what a handsome young prince he was. His looks would definitely give him a leg up on Athena, who was in truth rather plain looking.

Athena shook her head. "No reasonable admission committee would do that," she insisted, "not even Lancelot's Knight Night School." Chance ignored her and continued speculating. "I've been going to college reunions with my dad, the King, for ages. My uncle

and grandfather also went there, and the Royal Round Table Library is named after our family. I'm guessing that could help me."

"That might matter if you had the grades too," scoffed Athena, "but you don't, at all!" She was starting to get angry at how nonsensical Chance was acting. In truth, she was also angry that he might be right. It's true her mother was just as much a royal as Chance's father, but her mother was queen to a small kingdom that was not quite as grand--or rich--as Chance's home kingdom. "Why couldn't I have been born poor?" thought Athena to herself, "That would make everything easier."

Finally, a squire came rushing in, clutching a piece of paper.

"Here-ye, here-ye!" He shouted to the students, "I have the letter from the Castle College, dictating the Chosen One. All of the princes and princesses scurried around, clutching their hands to their chests and holding their breath, all hoping against hope that their name would be called.

"And the chosen one is . . ." the squire paused before shouting, "Chance Lottery!"

A confused silence fell about the room save for Chance's cheers of excitement. How could he have been accepted?

Athena stood in a stunned daze while pondering this question. Where had she gone wrong? She knew she

wasn't assured of being the Chosen One, but her professors had definitely assured her that she was a genius. Turns out she was mediocre at best. It also turns out that, in Chance's case at least, that's all one needs to be. She took every piece of advice ever bestowed upon her. Perfect grades? She had them. Extracurricular involvement? She was president. Prayer? She converted. The only thing she didn't try was pixie dust and four-leaf clovers. But in the end it didn't matter. The obvious mystery still remained of how Chance became the chosen one instead. The admissions process proved to be just like Chance's favorite sport, sword-fighting: stressful and unsuitable for children.

The End.

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Swift, Johnathan. "A Modest Proposal." 1729, Ireland.  
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## Honorable Mention

### The Other Half of the Story

*By Penny Duran*

She sighed as she combed her fingers through her brittle hair which she recently washed with watered-down shampoo. As she left the bathroom, she danced past the moving boxes and recalled the two-story, yellow house with its garden which had flourished like a paradise every summer. They had been forced to abandon it for a soulless gray brick of a home. She was comforted by the fact that her son had taken to the economizing lifestyle, recently exacerbated by the government shutdown. As he nuzzled the black cat at the kitchen table, he seemed completely unaware of the rust-colored wallpaper peeling off the yellowing walls and the mold creeping between the kitchen tiles. Her smile lines deepened as she realized that her son was beaming as brightly as any other ten-year-old on a birthday.

She placed last night's Chinese takeout into the microwave as breakfast. After pausing to take in the satisfying humming, she reached for the cookie jar on the kitchen counter. Within it remained hope of furthering her son's happiness.

Retrieving two ten dollar bills, the mother said,

“Here you go. Get yourself something for your birthday. I’m sorry that we won’t be able to have a birthday party.”

Taking his half of the day’s living allowance, the son’s luminous brown eyes twinkled in synchrony, “Thanks, Mom! But it’s alright. I don’t need a party.”

“No, we’ll have one as soon as the government shutdown is over,” she said while silently adding, “*And maybe we can return to the old house as well.*”

Only once her son had shut the door behind and had departed on the school bus did she pick up the phone.

When her boss’s voice greeted her, the mother uttered, “I’m sorry, but I’ll be running a little late. I’m walking to work to save money.”

“Not a problem,” her boss exhaled, “At this point I’m just glad that people are coming to work at all.”

The mother shoveled the remains of breakfast into a container and added it to the high heels and files in her satchel.

As she strolled along the sidewalk and as the more fortunate soared by in their cars, she thought of asking the boy’s father for money but quickly cast that thought aside. She had been managing just fine without him, and his *reluctant* aid was the last thing she needed.

A small, unwavering shadow began to form in the depths of her mind. She envisioned how happy her son had been at breakfast as he embraced the cat given to him by his father. Had it been a mistake to distance herself from her former love? Should she have agreed when her

boy had asked if his father could come and visit him on his birthday? A few delicate tears began to trickle down her face.

#

As she settled herself into her swivel chair in her office, she gently massaged her feet rendered sore from the long trek to work. The building was oddly empty. Ever since the shutdown had started, most of the affected employees hadn’t come to work. Many had begun the search for a new job with guaranteed pay. She knew well how unpleasant it was to ration every penny, and she knew the fear of not being able to pay rent. Still the shutdown wouldn’t last forever, and she remained confident that all the hours of free labor would eventually be paid.

Later as she sat down in the cafeteria with the few remaining employees and with her breakfast’s *leftover* leftovers, the mother stared intently at the phone at the other end of the room. To fulfill one of her son’s birthday wishes, she thought of punching in the numbers which she had been trying so hard to forget. Still she found herself hesitantly pressing each familiar number. Her finger hovered over the final digit as she recalled the night the former love of her life had abandoned her.

It had been raining heavily as they stood huddled under the narrow overhang of the roof and the scant protection it offered. Only minutes before, they had both been laughing uncontrollably as they sat on the couch watching a movie that mirrored their own story .

He told her that she looked just like the polished actress even though she bore neither the tall slim physique nor effortless grace. Sadly, the precarious house of cards which they had carefully built was doomed to topple. It had collapsed as quickly as the lightning overhead flashed through the air when she revealed that she was expecting.

As soon as he heard that revelation he dashed out into the deluge without looking back, leaving her desperately calling after him. Her pleas were drowned out by thunder and heavy rain.

Drifting back to the present, she pulled back from the phone. She simply couldn't do it. No matter how much unconditional love she bore for her son, she just couldn't fathom having to face HIM again.

#

When she arrived at the depressing giant gray monolith, her feet were swollen from the long walk. They were covered in a blanket of blisters even though she had chosen to wear her more practical shoes. As she entered the apartment, she smiled when she spotted her son working on his homework in the kitchen. The cat was immersed in tugging his shoelace.

"Did you get yourself something nice, Sweet-heart?" she asked, her voice strained with fatigue.

Her son returned her smile and gave her a cheerful reply, which she unfortunately couldn't deduce through her fog of exhaustion. Regardless, the mother replied, "That's great, Honey!"

The mother walked up to the counter to place her unused money back into the cookie jar: ten dollars more toward a later birthday party for her son. As she lifted the lid off the jar, she spotted another ten dollar bill. Around it was wrapped a note which read *for the rainy day fund*.

As the rain welled in her own eyes, she wondered more about her son's day, the other half of the story.

**First Place**

**Life's Merry-go-round**
*By Penny Duran*

I vividly remember the first time I rode a real merry-go-round, not a carousel, but a *Kettenkarussel* with arm-like swings that stretch outwards as it spins. I was only six years old and had just moved to Hamburg a couple of months earlier. It was my first time living in a country where English wasn't an official language. Even though I barely knew any German, I took a cheerful approach toward the move. It helped that there were many things to be happy about – including visits to the *Dom*, Hamburg's famous seasonal fair.

There were countless stands selling brightly colored licorice covered in sugar, furry friends looming next to stacks of cans and a twisted hall of mirrors where I once got so lost it took me nearly an hour to escape its walls. I might not have understood the bright neon signs nor the chattering voices around me, but the joy surrounding the *Dom* transcended languages.

As my little sister and I excitedly rushed toward the candy stalls, I finally saw it: the merry-go-round. It was unlike anything else that I had seen. From its lofty arms it bore chairs that hung from delicate chains. I gravitated toward it like a magnet. Once ensconced on the

merry-go-round, a knot in my stomach replaced the initial sensation of wonder. As I sat in the suspended chair, I began to gently rattle the chains. Holding one in my little hands I wondered, “What if they were to break?”

Once the merry-go-round began to turn and spin quicker and rise higher into the heavens, the nausea subsided. The only thing that escaped my mouth was laughter. The wind brushed through my hair with its agile yet rough hands, and I began to sprout wings and fly just like the airplane that had brought me to this country.

Life as a Foreign Service youth is a lot like my first time riding a merry-go-round -- wild and daunting yet ultimately rewarding. A new school, country or continent might appear frightening at first, but once the merry-go-round of life starts spinning, you realize that each new adventure is not scary but rather beautiful and even freeing. I admit that I still sometimes become consumed by fear when I look down from life's merry-go-round. I worry that the chains will break, that I won't be able to find new friends and that I won't be able to integrate myself into a new community. Will I ever be able to learn the language, or will I always be an outsider?

However, often all you need is a leap of faith. Just like how I took a leap of faith and climbed onto the merry-go-round, I also took one with my schooling and decided to attend a German public school. All the initial worries faded away with the joy of that ride. I made friends, became a part of the ballet community and lastly learned the

language. I found my happiness in Germany and a second home. The merry-go-round of Germany's impact on me is still revolving and evolving, and I still go to a German school to this day. This summer, I'll return to Germany, where I will graduate from a German high school, a *Gymnasium* as it is called.

The Foreign Service lifestyle is like a world's fair full of wonders. Sometimes it is a hall of mirrors where you are afraid of losing your sense of identity. Sometimes it is saying goodbye to your friends as the drop tower of life hurtles you toward yet another unknown country. Sometimes it is a haunted house whose inhabitants seem scary at first until you realize that we're all human in the end despite our differences. After the endless overseas experience comes to an end and the fair is done, long may merriness continue. The wild, dizzy journey is worth the risk.

## Second Place

### The Gold Medal

*By Madison SantaBarbara*

Every stroke I take I could feel the bottom of the blade being pushed against the current of a big body of saltwater. The sun is beating down making my skin burn. My face is drenched with sweat dripping into my eyes to the point where I could barely see and I could taste the salt. I see the start where boats are being lined up. The announcer is calling the number of boats in each heat. The announcer is loud, has a hat on and a big megaphone. I am paddling to the start, my stomach twisting and turning. I wonder to myself if I will make it through the race or not. I pray to god with my handles together and hope everything is okay and that I do great. I get up to the start and I see other girls surrounding me with their beautiful boats and paddles ready in the water to go. I hear the announcer say, "one minute until start." I sit up tall, place my white blades in the water and put my racing face on. I'm ready to go; I feel the energy from the other girls next to me. I look side to side. I make eye contact with both girls and I say "goodluck." The announcer yells "ready, attention, go!" I yanked my handles into my stomach at a fast pace and I am in the race. First ten strokes I tell myself I'm doing this for myself and my team. I look side to side and see all the

boats still in line with each other. I see birds flying high and the sun is glaring on my Oakleys. My arms and legs are burning while I shove the blades into the water in and out. I'm starting to push away from the other girls. I see my bow ball off of everyone else's boat. I keep pushing hard, I am almost at the sprint of my race. I hear the launches in the water following me with their loud motors to follow me just in case the boat flips. I turn my head to the left and I can see the crowd. I take 20 more strokes and I tell myself, "I got this, lets go." The sweat is dripping into my mouth and down my legs. The oars are getting slippery and it gets harder and harder to grip the handles. I hear the crowd roaring; there is so much excitement. I keep going, my back is as straight as a white board. My chest up tall and my head forward telling myself, "I can do this, lets kick some butt." My boat pushes further and further away from the other boats in my race. I hear my mom screaming my name, I look over and smile. I can see cameras facing me and I want to make a scene of a huge celebration. There are 10 more strokes in the race. I need to give it all I got. This is it...I count down "10,9,8,7,6,5,4,3,2,1." I'm listening to the buzzer, I'm getting more tense and excited to stick my feet in the water. The buzzer goes off and the announcer calls out "paddle." I stick my hands up in the air shaking my arms back and forth showing how happy I am. I take my feet with drenched socks out of the foot stretcher and stick my legs in the water. It was the best feeling I have ever felt. The

other boats start to cross the finish line, some look upset and other's look happy that they made it onto the podium. I said "great job" and headed back to the dock.

## Honorable Mention

### How My Darkness Led Me To A Greater Purpose

*By Katie Stalling*

“Slay the giraffe!”

I begin to shake uncontrollably as I hear toxic comments being spit at me from across the hallway. The next day, I pretend to be sick to avoid hearing the harassing comments. Little did I know that even at home, in my safe place, I couldn’t avoid all of the noise. Images of my face were being posted all over social media with offensive comments. My once happy, bubbly soul suddenly faded and filled with darkness as I was trapped.

For many students, school is a safe place filled with all of their close friends. Unfortunately, this was never the case for me. Starting as early as elementary school, I began to feel like a complete outsider. I had been locked in closets, pushed around on the playground, and made fun of for the dark circles under my eyes. I started having severe anxiety attacks going to school, knowing I would be walking into a den of starving wolves ready to rip me to shreds. I confided in my teachers, hoping they would protect me in my vulnerable state. Weeks turned into months - the bullying still continued without any support from my school. I was forced to be strong and to fight my own battles, even if behind all that “tough” skin was an insecure, scared little girl.

As I grew older, all my friends had abandoned me. It was my freshman year and almost everyone referred to me as a giraffe again. Cyber bullying increased immensely as the football team began to sexually harass and taunt me on a daily basis. I could no longer eat my lunch in peace, as people would take video and post pictures of me, placing targets on my forehead. “Slay the giraffe” became the most popular saying at my school.

Unfortunately, I became numb to everything. After begging my school several times for support and protection, I realized the only ones they were protecting were the football players. I was forced to fight another battle on my own.

My life changed drastically from my bullying experience as my relationship with God began to gradually build in my time of darkness. Graciously, I was led to Christian Heritage, the school I now attend. I didn’t have to walk into school feeling scared or unsafe anymore. The kindness from my new classmates made me feel welcomed and thankful to find a place where I finally fit in. Light began to fill my soul where I felt the safety and security I was supposed to feel as a student, knowing my teachers would protect me. I no longer had to apologize for who I was.

Today, I am a high school student who strives to prevent kids from the exposure of bullying. As Genesis 50:20 says, “You intended to harm me, but God intended it for good to accomplish what is now being done, the saving of

f many lives.” I would be lying to myself if I said bullying is not a huge part of the person I have become today. There are so many opportunities for growth in our hardships if we just allowed ourselves to be open to them.

Learning from my past experiences, I have made it a goal to become the teacher that I desperately needed when I was younger. I will be the teacher that fights for her students and ensures a safe classroom environment. I want to spread kindness and compassion in a school system that lacks those qualities. I strive to work with school administration to help prevent children from experiencing similar hardships. I want to dedicate my life to be the voice for the millions of kids who do not have enough courage to speak for themselves. I will no longer be silenced.

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LITERARY COMPETITION WINNERS 2019

ADULT

**POETRY**

**First Place**

*The Camel's Ride* ..... Chris Hemingway

**Second Place**

*Life is Like 6th Grade Math* ..... Stephen Gorman

**Honorable Mention**

*Charlee Crowley's Smile* ..... Sara Caldwell

**FICTION**

**First Place**

*The Quill and the Queen* ..... Claire Thomas

**Second Place**

*The Game* ..... Jamie Angevine

**Honorable Mention**

*Dollhouses* ..... Nancy Manning

**NONFICTION**

**First Place**

*Not the Sahara of my Dreams* ..... Abby Ripley

**Second Place**

*Growing Mammoth Pumpkins Can  
Be Hazardous To Your Health* ..... Carol Banner

**Honorable Mention**

*Comedy of Nature* ..... Tom Kidd

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Adult

**First Place**

**The Camel's Ride**

By Chris Hemingway

Over the mountaintops afar,

To the peaks filled with sunlight

Upon the sand dunes of yesterday

And the myths of the deserts of Arabia

There emerges out of the stillness of the hour

A savior, a lasting bridge to hope

It is unlike heroes of old or kings or peasants overthrowing their master

Not like Lawrence or Saladin

But equally as majestic in their duality for life

Don't let her humps stump you

For she will astound and befuddle and conjure and illuminate the Earth below

She is instead, steadfast, determinate, and the unmistakable smell of magic pervades the land

At daybreak, she awakes to begin her quest of happenstance and duty to woman and child and family

Amidst toil and hardship, following the lands laid waste by war and famine

She begins in earnest, her feat of mercy for all to show

What is her mission, what will she seek?  
Perhaps, something as simple as a whisper  
Only the angels can see  
By day, the camel rests  
Stopping for an oasis drink, a shower of praise, a beacon  
of light  
What fields will she sow, what will she find?  
Her dromedary sorrows won't end her desire for peace and  
healing  
She treads on, her feet not stopping below  
After sunset, the camel continues her ride  
Over trodden barren lands, overshadowed by sorrow and  
shame  
With hope that seems at a loss, she meets her foe the wind  
and his terrible grasp on life  
He beckons to hinder, wants to prolong the suffering  
meant to last at his behest  
In the night, the camel stops To think about her task at  
hand  
With her sword of truth and her unshakable desire to en-  
dure  
What pains will she discover, what maidens will follow?  
Therein lies the fate that her majestic beauty will test  
She arrives, not at a high palace or golden throne or exalt-  
ed chamber

But at a solitary tree, and a child in waiting with a mother's  
hope in limbo  
The camel kneels before them and sniffs the flowers near the  
bush  
She lays on the ground and rests her head on the child's  
shoulder  
It was her milk they needed, not gold or a moneylender's  
treasure or limitless rubies  
A child's salvation now waits in the heart and soul of an ani-  
mal with an unique gift  
A treasure that can never be counted by human hands  
The mother lay waiting for her savior who arrived during  
life's pitfalls  
Let this be a lesson for all of us  
We must all take the journey and seek life's magical myster-  
ies  
And simply  
Ride like the camel

**Second Place**

**Life is Like 6th Grade Math**

*By Stephen Gorman*

Life can be easy, and Life can be hard.  
 Sometimes – life can be tough... Like 6th grade math.  
 No one ever said it was going to be easy.  
 In fact, sometimes it can be down right, improper. Like  
 some fractions? Why can't it be simplified?

As we grow older; maturing, learning... Things change.  
 There are additions, and subtractions, Dividing the chores  
 and responsibilities. At some point we fall in love.  
 Go and multiply we are told.  
 We'll get all the basic facts learned eventually... won't we?

Life is no longer  $2+2=4!$   
 We need to know the answers to life's important questions.  
 Why are we here? Who am I?  
 Where can I get a sandwich, I'm starving?

Math, like life, is a bit more challenging these days. How  
 much is 15% off the price of that jacket?  
 What will the new price be after 15% is taken off? And  
 what about the 6% sales tax?  
 Does that get added or subtracted?  
 And what if you only have \$60 in your wallet, Will you  
 have enough money to buy the coat? If you do, what will  
 your change be?  
 And if you don't, how much more will you need?

Of course, everything in life is not really that equal. Those  
 two parallel dashes never solved anything!  
 It's more like greater than or equal to; Or worse, less than  
 or equal to.  
 That's closer to reality.

Life can be like a math word problem. An open-ended  
 question.

A numerical expression to calculate. Like Algebra,  
 Or even a pre-algebraic expression.  
 Who really knows what the fourteenth letter Of the alpha-  
 bet is equal to anyway?

If I can't understand math word problems, How am I sup-  
 posed to understand my life?

Why can't life come with key words for solving prob-  
 lems?  
 How many members of my family are coming to dinner –  
*in all?* What's the *difference* between an unexpected visit  
 From distant cousins and a peaceful Saturday afternoon  
 nap? If you have *less than* your neighbor,  
*How much more* money do they have than you?

There are rules to remember, like Copy your numbers  
 correctly, And write your numbers clearly.  
 Put your numbers in the correct column. Oh, if only life  
 were *that* simple.

It's as if the Almighty gave us a sacred charge, A duty  
 perhaps, in getting ready to make our Appearance, on this  
 spinning, blue-green planet. The Almighty points at the  
 Earth,  
 Looks us in the eye, and simply says, "Solve!"

Solve?  
 "How much time do I have?" we ask. "Well, I can only  
 make an estimate, but..."  
 "... a reasonable benchmark says you have ohhhh...  
 About 75 years. Give or take."

Give or take? Well. Here we are. Life.  
 It's not trigonometry, it's not calculus, and it's not geom-  
 etry. It's not even that hard really.  
 If we open our eyes, and open our minds, and open our  
 hearts, We can find out that it's easier than we think,  
 In fact, it can even be as easy as 6th Grade Math.

**Honorable Mention**

**Charlee Crowley's Smile**

*By Sara Caldwell*

Old friends,  
local but seldom seen,  
whose smiles remind me of times rich with becom-  
ing,  
are like beads  
a master craftsman  
chooses for a necklace  
to offset, and so accentuate,  
the other more numbered  
but less patinated ones.  
A master jeweler  
will create a repeated pattern,  
and put, every so often,  
between the ordinary beads,  
a piece of old stone  
to give the work  
depth and curiosity,  
history almost,

so that the wearer  
will get inquires  
as to whether it's antique.

Antique, as we know,  
holds a certain mystique,

as do old, seldom seen friends  
Strung alongt henecklace  
of our lovely, local, wrinkling lives.

**First Place****The Quill and the Queen***By Claire Thomas*

Rumor held that the king had died without an heir.

Arda had her doubts – you couldn't put too much stock in anything you heard in this backwater town. The hamlet of Dôl Glawog was too small for anyone important to remember it existed, let alone take the trouble to bring tidings all the way from Camelot. Stories like this one arrived in town like false spring – welcome, but unreliable, full of empty promises that planted hope where it was doomed to wither.

Still, it pleased the guests at the ramshackle inn to share some gossip over their supper. By the time sundown sent the men of the town in search of ale and mead, libations had already loosened the travelers' tongues. Hearty food and a warm fire supplied the necessary fuel for animated conversation, and soon, travelers and farmers alike shed skepticism alongside their heavy, woolen cloaks.

Arda did her best to ignore their tales, as heady and tempting as the rich cider she poured into an endless parade of mugs. She knew what it was like to allow herself to be swept up in the moment, captivated by stories

of faraway lands. Invariably, she woke up the next morning on the same straw mattress, with the same chores waiting for her. And somehow, the damp, morning air felt a little bit colder, and the ache in her hands from scrubbing the pots was a little bit sharper, and the rest of her life loomed ahead of her like a desolate mountain.

Instead, she pretended that she was a rock in the river that flowed alongside Dôl Glawog, letting the stories slide over and around her. Words shimmered in the air like the shine of fish scales – elusive and impossible to track, but she had learned to take little notice.

It might be months before the truth trickled down to this inn in the middle of nowhere, and when it did.... Well, there would still be pots to scour and floors to scrub. The farmers would still be toiling among the remnants of the autumn harvest, and the specter of winter would be drawing near, bringing long, frozen nights and the constant gnaw of hunger.

Arda shook her head. Life here held no room for kings and courts; it was small and cramped, full of layer upon layer of mud, the sticky remnants of dried ale, and the musty odor of wet wool. Whatever happened to the faraway king might as well have taken place in an entirely different world.



She noticed the stranger right away. Most of the travelers who passed through Dôl Glawog were familiar:

peddlers and performers following the same paths they had worn across the kingdom for years. Other visitors, save the occasional tax collector or wandering knight, were rare, and this one was particularly unusual. He was clad entirely in gray, and even his long, dark beard was threaded with strands of silver. His clothes were rich, but worn and outdated. The fur trim of his cloak was shabby, and the embroidery that danced across his tunic was threadbare in spots. There was a stillness about him that seemed out of place amongst the rowdy occupants of the cramped inn.

The other travelers clustered together, drawn like moths to the warmth and light of the fire, eager for company after long days on the road. But this stranger kept himself apart, sitting half in shadow near the door, where frosty air rushed in with every newcomer.

Once or twice Arda approached to offer him food and refreshment, but each time he waved her away with a twinkle in his eye. As the night wore on, his watchful presence slipped into the background of her thoughts like the words still weaving a tapestry of sound from those gathered around the fire.

Another hour passed, and tongues began to slow, heavy from weariness and wine. “A song!” someone demanded, and then other voices took up the cry.

The stranger smiled a queer, little smile as he drew near. He stopped a few feet away from her, averting his

gaze as if he were approaching a skittish horse. “That was an interesting song.” His voice was rough but resonant, like waves rushing over a bed of shale.

“Th-thank you, sir,” Arda stuttered, caught in a tide of panic. No one ever asked questions about her music. Would he think her mad if she admitted that she couldn’t remember what she had sung?

“It reminded me of a story I had forgotten long ago,” the old man mused, seemingly oblivious to her discomfort. His gaze slid through her now, seeing something far away. The silence stretched tight between them as she waited, uncertain what was required of her.

Like a bow string snapping back into position, the stranger’s attention abruptly returned to the present. “I wish to offer you a gift, as thanks,” he said.

“That’s very kind, sir,” Arda replied, immensely relieved that she would not have to supply any impossible answers. “The innkeeper collects the coins.”

He shook his head. “I wish to thank you, not the innkeeper.”

“There is no need,” she protested, but the stranger was already moving. In two long strides, he swept past her to one of the oaken tables. The surface was empty and clean, although Arda could have sworn she hadn’t yet cleared the dishes.

“Behold,” he said. “I offer you a choice.” His cloak

swirled around him as he turned, and suddenly, three objects lay on the table beside him.“ “My pack has grown heavy during my travels, and I no longer have need of these baubles. Take the one you desire most.” He beckoned Arda closer, and she obliged, fascinated by the splendor of the treasures arrayed before her.

The first was a golden brooch in the shape of a crown. Each point of the coronet held a glittering jewel in a different color: ruby, emerald, sapphire and pearl. It was dazzling, but despite the delicate craftsmanship, the metal was surprisingly cold and heavy beneath her fingers. For a moment, she felt something sharp and bitter gazing back at her, a foreign presence lurking beneath the brilliance of the jewels.

Suppressing a shudder, she turned to the second object, a dagger of burnished silver. Its hilt was made of smooth, scarlet leather, and the blade lay upon a sheath of blood-red velvet. The contrast between the loveliness of the artistry and the deadliness of its purpose made her heart ache with a nameless pain. Her fingers twitched with longing, and yet, she knew the dagger would not bring her strength. Its power was no greater than the hand that wielded it.

The third item was so different from the others that at first she wasn't sure what she was seeing. It was a feather, but so bedraggled that she could not tell whether it had belonged to a goose or an eagle. A strange feeling swept

through her as she gazed at its tattered plumage. *How did this traveler come to possess it?* she wondered. *What sights has it seen beyond the boundaries of this windswept village? What secrets can it tell?*

Arda looked up to find the stranger waiting expectantly; it was time to make her choice. Only a fool would give up the riches promised by the dagger or the brooch, and yet, they whispered of darkness and evil deeds. Almost of its own accord, her hand moved towards the feather.

Perhaps her ragged spirit recognized something kindred in an object meant for flight, yet forever denied the power to fly. It called to her, just like the fragments of stories and songs that had burrowed through the stony exterior of her heart. Whatever lies she told herself, however withdrawn she became, those images were part of her. Like dormant seeds, they lay beneath frozen ground, waiting for a spring thaw or a song to send them bursting forth.

She stretched out a finger to touch the plume, gently caressing its silky tendrils. *What would I do with gold and jewels?* They'd bring her nothing but trouble if anyone realized what she possessed. Decision made, she allowed her hand to close around the feather.

Instantly, the brooch and the dagger vanished. Perplexed, she turned to the traveler with a question on her

lips, only to find him shrouded in a glowing mist. His gaze was steady, but his face blurred, shifting like sunlight through leaves, revealing age and youth by turns as the forest wears its seasons.

When the golden haze cleared, the man who faced her was the same, yet different. His clothes remained shabby and his beard was still streaked with silver, but he was taller and straighter, with sharp, hawk-like features. His eyes were serious but not severe as he gazed down at her. "Tell me," he said softly. "Why did you choose the quill?"

"Jewels cannot grant me what I seek," Arda replied faintly, dazed by his transformation. "Nor can a dagger win me peace."

"And what do you seek?" the old man asked.

But she had no answer. Her heart yearned for nameless songs and stories. In her dreams, she journeyed down tangled paths, through ancient forests and foreign lands, while unknown words called out to her, begging to be spoken. She longed for knowledge and freedom, wisdom and innocence, solitude and companionship. In her bones, she knew that life should be a road and not a cage.

He nodded, as if she had spoken. "My name is Merlin," he said, "and I have come from Camelot."

## Second Place

### The Game

*By Jamie Angevine*

Once upon a time on a rainy Tuesday, the Gods decided to play a game.

"What would happen if we altered one tiny element of history?" He speculated.

"Time flows both ways," She answered. "What's done can be undone."

Rock, Paper, Scissors - and He lost, as usual.

She pulled back her bow and released Karma's arrow toward the Earth. It zipped through ozone and centuries and struck an insignificant target in the middle of a desert. Amused, the Gods settled in to watch events unfold.

Two scarab beetles circled around a ball of dung, trying to steal it from the one that perched on top. He threatened with shaking forelegs from his superior position. Then, in the blink of a compound eye, a scorpion popped into existence beneath him. The beetle jumped off in surprise and the other two danced in confusion. The scorpion's dangerous tail lashed out lightning fast, striking the back of the smallest insect. His short legs

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quivered and he froze. The tail whipped out again. The other two beetles scuttled away, not daring to interfere.

The scorpion inched forward, twitching in anger. A low hiss filled the air. The beetle wondered what would happen if he stood his ground. He wondered if it was all a bad dream. Then a wave of sand interrupted his thoughts.

\*

The young child hunched over the skirmish in wide-eyed fascination. That scorpion appeared out of nowhere! She forgot her own suffering while caught up in someone else's, even if it was just a dumb beetle. It didn't fight back when attacked. But she, too, had cowered beneath the whip. Two days later and still her skin was on fire.

Anger at her shortcomings made her want to punish something. She kicked out her foot and a shower of sand buried the insect.

"Break's over!" her brother warned.

She started to follow when remorse nudged her conscience. Was the beetle okay? She fished it out with cupped hands. Maybe it would fight back someday and become something more.

"Maybe I will, too," she whispered to it. "This will not be my fate."

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She joined the others for a hard day's work in the shadow of the pyramid.

\*

"Ancient Egypt's pretty cool, don't you think?" Colin straightened his safety goggles.

"Mmmhmm." Chelsea half listened while she prepped for the experiment.

His lab partner was smart and sweet, but also shy. He wanted to ask her out but kept rambling instead.

"I heard they used levitation to move the blocks into place," he continued. "How else could they have built those tombs?"

She read the lab instructions. "Measure out 4 grams of sulfur." When she was done he checked the readout on the digital scale.

"Almost there. Ugh that stinks." He wrinkled his nose.

She tapped a little more onto the metal surface, then answered his previous question. "My guess would be slave labor."

"Oh. You're probably right." He picked up the bar magnet and pressed it between his fingers, fidgeting.

She nudged his shoulder and laughed. "Levitation sounds way cooler, though."

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He took a quick breath as squirrels raced through his stomach. “So, are you excited for the class trip tomorrow?”

She smiled. “I am. Actually, I’m looking for something. Maybe you can help.”

\*

“So, are you ready to fill me in on this mysterious errand?” Colin asked.

They perched on a log near the bonfire that someone started with lighter fluid and a torch. About a dozen classmates gathered in packs of three or four around the perimeter. The chaperones, a couple of dads, stood smoking off to the side. Three boys struggled to assemble a tent nearby, and a fourth stood watching and barking orders.

“It’s funny you mentioned ancient Egypt yesterday,” Chelsea began. “I’m part Egyptian on my mom’s side, and my grandfather has always been obsessed with finding out who we really were.”

He inched closer to her, pretending to scratch a bug bite. “And?”

“Nothing yet. But it’s weird. He gets these *feelings* about things sometimes. For example, years ago, he told my aunt that her baby wasn’t going to make it.”

“Oh, that’s awful.”

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“Yeah, but the strange thing is, she wasn’t even pregnant yet. And he was right. The baby did die.”

Colin shivered. “That’s wild.”

“It happened when I was really little. Anyway, a few months ago he got in touch with some professor in Cairo that claimed he had information about our family. My mom didn’t want him to go. She worried something bad would happen. He’s gotten really forgetful since my grandmother passed away.”

“Was he okay?”

“Well, he came back fine, but it was like the trip didn’t happen. He couldn’t recall anything. Then last week, he disappeared.”

“Oh my god.”

“We searched but he hasn’t turned up yet. The thing is,” her eyes slid away from him, “I also sense things sometimes. I feel like he found something out and it made his brain go a little haywire. And I think he’s nearby, waiting for me.”

“Really? Why?”

“Well, we’ve been here before, it’s one of his favorite places. And something’s telling me I couldn’t look until now. So, as soon as I can sneak off, i’m going to find him.” She sounded confident.

“It can’t wait until tomorrow?” “No, it has to be tonight.”

“Then I’m going with you.” He risked putting an arm around her and she leaned against him.

\*

*It’s been three days. Or is it four, five?*

One morning he awoke in an abandoned cabin, shivering under a rough woolen blanket. Supplies and food lay scattered around the room. After a quick cold scrub in the nearby stream, some of his life returned. He knew his name and recognized where he was, but not how he’d gotten there or why.

Something hovered at the edge of his mind, something important. This confusion happened to him more frequently now, but he imagined moments of clarity like tiny seeds that sprouted up through the ground. They couldn’t be rushed.

*I went to Egypt. I discovered something...*

As he moved along the path today, a delicate tendrill of thought crept into his mind. He grasped for it, stumbled, and fell to his knees.

The moment stretched. The vine reached upwards.

Splayed fingers swam through damp soil. He leaned down, forehead touching the ground in prayer. Then he slowly rolled onto his back.

The leaf-thought unfurled and captured the light. He laughed out loud as his past returned in a rush of memories. Wide eyes drank the sky, swished the cocktail clouds, and spat out the birds. Many hours passed and he enjoyed the sun.

That night the moon’s face sang to him. He retrieved his leather bound journal and stepped into the moonlit glade. A circle of stones cried out for fire and he gathered leaves and twigs to burn. Smoke drifted while stars skated the black ice overhead.

Then he knelt down and opened the book. Rough fingers gripped a pencil and he passed on his knowledge. It was time she knew who she was; who she’d been.

Behind him a twig cracked and he ripped out the page as a reflex. Two shadowy figures approached and one ran towards him.

“Grandpa! I knew you’d be here.”

Without turning, he said, “I found the truth.” Then he collapsed.

\*

When they met him by the fire, he was already suffering from pneumonia. He regained consciousness one last time. In the hospital room, he grabbed Chelsea’s hand and pulled her close.

“The answer is in here. Look!” He pushed the book at her, then fell back, exhausted. He died two days later.

They discovered a necklace in her grandfather’s

belongings that was gold and shaped like a beetle. The note said, “For Chelsea, the symbol of rebirth and transformation.” She felt closer to him with it on and kept reaching up to hold it. That night she had a vivid dream about ancient Egypt. She toiled in the heat and struggled to survive, but eventually rose to power. She woke with the necklace hot in her hand.

After the funeral, she sat alone in her grandfather’s study poring through his journal. The pages overflowed with stories she’d already heard of his travels, musings about family history, and sketches of archeological findings. But she had yet to find something significant.

Late afternoon sun crawled across the floorboards and up the heavy oak door on the far wall. A ladybug wandered in and out of the old fashioned keyhole. Then it flew over and landed near her thumb.

She watched it meander for a moment and her mind drifted as she counted the dots on its back. Mr. Turner’s voice returned from sixth grade bio. “*Insecta, Coleoptera*. A ladybug is a type of beetle.”

Then her breath caught. Beneath the tiny feet, she saw something new. She tilted the book sideways to catch the light. There it was, the edge of a torn page, peeking out of the leather cover.

She pulled it free and unfolded it. A drawing of a woman with a face like hers stared back. She had thick black hair under some sort of crown, and wore a

sleeveless dress. On her chest was an amulet shaped like a beetle. At the bottom of the page he’d written these words:

*As it happened before, so it shall be again.  
The past and the present are one and the same.  
Remember your story, remember your pain,  
And never forget, we’re all part of the Game.*

Chelsea’s heart pounded as she touched the similar amulet around her own neck. She felt dizzy as a memory of a sunshine-bathed courtyard flooded her senses. Then it faded away.

The ladybug landed on the drawing then flew up into the air. It zipped through the open window towards the garden steeped in late summer enchantment.

\*

The Gods turned to one another.

“Interesting,” He commented. “He figured it out. Does that mean we lost?”

She shrugged her shoulders and looked at the bow and arrow. “There’s always next time.”

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**Honorable Mention**
**Dollhouses***By Nancy Manning*

My niece should have been jumping up and down in the driveway, her brown braids flopping all over the place. Instead when I arrived, she and my sister weren't home.

I waited well over an hour. Kept checking for a return text as I scrutinized the lawn perfectly manicured, the shrubbery tightly trimmed, and the house, a blue colonial that glistened like new paint.

When I had just about given up, my sister pulled in.

I stepped out of my car, asked her where had she been.

She avoided eye contact with me and scooped up a bag of groceries then directed Madison to go wash her hands for dinner.

Like a well-trained dog, Madison obeyed, slipping past me with her head hung in defeat.

I pressed for an explanation. "I got here at four. Did you forget?" I had planned to take Madison to Burlingame in Rhode Island, about an hour away. We'd leave as soon as the bus dropped her off.

"You can't take her." Ellen headed for the door.

"Take her'?" Madison's pout fueled my questions. "What's this about?" Was it the raccoons I told Madison

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she might see. My sister always feared them when we went Girl Scout camping as kids.

"I'm her mother. She's mine."

"I know she's yours."

My sister unlocked the door, marched inside with Madison. I walked inside too. I replayed the many conversations the three of us had the previous weeks. First, the date of the trip. We picked this June weekend because school had let out, the weather was sunny and warm and I was able to get the time off from work. Second, the camping supplies. Madison wanted a mess kit like mine, but a Cinderella sleeping bag and a pink backpack. Her mother wanted her to get grown up equipment. We settled on matching purple sleeping bags and backpacks. Third, we practiced pitching my old pup tent and wove homemade sit-upons from old newspapers and scraps of folded vinyl. I showed her how to pack lightly and roll her sleeping bag snugly by kneeling on the fabric and pressing out wrinkles. My ancient Girl Scout skills were coming in handy. By the second try, Madison had it mastered. "Like a jelly doughnut," she smiled, her two front teeth missing. Every evening before she went off to bed, Madison called me, giggling her countdown. "Ant Deb, only twenty-one more days." Then fourteen, seven, then two.

But the problem couldn't have been these preparations.

My sister leaned toward me, "It's Doug."

I shrugged. "What now? You told me he's living

with some woman and her kids. Hasn't been around in weeks."

My sister turned to me. "Yes, Deborah, and he wants Madison next week, so I want her this weekend."

I felt punched in the gut. Poor Madison. Being used as a pawn between two squabbling parents. But why did our camping plans have to be wrecked? An image came into my head, that of ten-year-old Ellen kicking her Victorian dollhouse when our mother wouldn't let her sleep over Cindy Mason's house.

I softened my tone. "It'll be fun."

Ellen took a box of mac and cheese from the cabinet, started boiling water in a pot already on the stove. "Madison is paper thin. She hurts easily. One day you'll marry, have kids, see what I mean."

"First I have to find a guy who loves sports as much as I do." I reconsidered. "You could go with us."

Ellen snickered. "You know I hate the woods."

"But we'll be together. Come on."

Ellen rolled her eyes, kept busy. As she always did.

My sister had recruited me to be in her daughter's life, from the very beginning. Doug worked monster hours, including lots of overtime and several trips a year for his insurance company. I switched my shift to evenings at the group home to help Ellen more. She never wanted to hear stories about the progress I made with my special needs students like when Tony finally understood the sign for *eat* or David offered me a hug

after a lifetime of never touching anyone. Instead Ellen focused on *her* needs. Showed me how to hold Madison her way or give her a bottle correctly or change her diaper properly, but I never did catch on how to swaddle Madison without the blanket unfolding itself when I lifted her up. In any case, I helped as Ellen, raced around the house like a mad woman dusting, vacuuming, rearranging furniture, emptying the garbage pail each time I threw in it a dirty Kleenex. She even prepared supper well before lunch by making the salad or peeling potatoes. Ellen was an impeccable homemaker, just like she had been a perfect bride in a perfect wedding. Doug, Mr. GQ in his tailored suit, and my sister, the model for a *Modern Bride* cover with flawless make up, in a stunning satin and chiffon dress, with a flowing veil and long train. Nothing seemed out of place. Cameras never lie, or did they?

Late night feedings and Madison's episodes of colic frazzled my sister. She and Doug argued about how he left his plate on the table or how he forgot to pick up a gallon of milk on his way home. Fissures appeared like the tiny cracks in her fine china.

When Madison entered first grade, Ellen miscarried and conflicts intensified. Rumbblings became earthquakes and Doug spent more time away.

When Madison started second grade this past year, Doug moved out, filed for divorce. Ellen revealed to her lawyer that Doug had cheated a handful of times,

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that she didn't want him to have shared custody of Madison.

Ellen emptied the box of macaroni into the pot of boiling water and held the wooden spoon tightly to stir. I felt squeezed in a grip that my sister was never loosening.

This past Easter was difficult. We visited our parents down in Fairfield County. At the dinner table, I noticed something odd. Whenever my parents asked Madison about school or her friends, Ellen provided the answers. My mother looked at me. I shrugged. Finally, my father put down his fork, took a slow breath. "Madison, your auntie brought home a trophy for the biggest trout at the VFW Fishing Derby."

Madison's eyes were aglow. "A trophy? Can I see it?"

"It's up there on the mantle," my father pointed.

Madison skipped over to see it.

My mother chimed in, "You didn't like fishing or scouting, did you Ellen?"

"I wanted tap lessons."

Later that night, our mother brought out a relic of our childhood—Ellen's Victorian dollhouse, about three feet in height with pink exterior walls, white trim, and a wraparound porch. Inside were wooden furniture miniatures, including a couch with creamy velvet upholstery, four-poster beds with white lace canopies, and a wood burning stove. The walls were covered in dark paper with

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velvet swirls. The roof of the round tower lifted off so you could move around the little wooden figures.

Madison clapped excitedly. "Can I play with it, Mommy?"

Ellen examined the upholstery and the four miniature dolls and commented, "The furniture is so natty and look at the dolls. They need new clothes and their porcelain faces are chipped."

My father held out his arthritic hands. "I'll fix it up. Look how my granddaughter likes it."

But my sister didn't seem to be listening. "I played that thing for hours." She walked over to it and began arranging the furniture and moving the family through different rooms.

We brought it home to Ellen's and a week later when I saw it the hall closet, I was shocked. The exterior walls were covered in globs of puky green.

"What happened?"

"I colored it with my finger paints and Mommy got really made. She said I was didn't play with it properly and took it away." Madison shrugged her shoulders. "Doesn't matter. I don't feel like playing with it anyway."

The buzzer went off and Ellen removed the macaroni from the stove.

"Ellen," I started slowly. "You let me take Madison trick or treating even though you insisted Halloween was for babies."

She rolled her eyes. “Yeah, and your costume was hideous.”

*Hideous*, it was. I had tied my purple bathrobe tied around my neck, wore an old nightgown over an shoddy pair of gray sweats. Made a silver crown from cardboard and aluminum foil and Madison placed it atop my head. It sat crookedly. My niece wore a blue Elsa costume, a silver wand fluttering around the air as she cast lovely enchantments around the house and tried to turn her mother into ice.

Earlier that day Madison had ripped her *Seasame Street* posters from her walls.

I told my sister I was trick or treating with or without my niece.

Madison wiped her snotty nose on her blue sleeve and asked, “Can’t I go, Mommy? Can’t I?”

Ellen exhaled loudly, waited. “Aw right.”

Madison poked me with her wand. “Ant Deb, aren’t princesses supposed to wear makeup?”

“You’re right. I have magical colors here in my purse.”

I let my niece apply to my face all the blush and globs of red lipstick she wanted as my sister stood arms crossed in the doorway. She said nothing but held out a pillowcase Madison could use to collect treats.

“Thanks, Mommy,” Madison smiled and gave her mother a quick hug around the waist.

“You want some mac and cheese?” my sister asked without looking up.

I looked my sister in the eye. “We aren’t stick figure you move around in a dollhouse. We certainly aren’t made of paper. We’re human. Flesh and blood. We get hurt during a game but we bounce back. If you’re mad at Doug, don’t blame Madison.”

Ellen began to sob. “He sends off a check, thinks that’s all he has to do. He doesn’t even call. He should be here.”

“Then call him. You have many things need to talk about.”

“I’ve tried.”

“Start by saying you could have been a better wife. You’ve got to give and take in this.”

“It’s not that easy.”

“Picking up the pieces never is.” I smiled. “And today let your daughter go camping.”

Ellen didn’t say much through dinner. I knew she was mulling over her decision. Around dessert she granted her daughter permission. She even started mentioning places where the three of could go over the summer—the Beardsley Zoo, Quassy, the Dinosaur Museum—all places my sister had never been. It wasn’t easy, but Ellen did it. She even told Madison they could paint the dollhouse together and buy a new dolls.

I added, “Yeah, a mommy, a daddy, a princess daughter, and a wacky auntie.”

After dinner, Madison dragged her sleeping bag and backpack to the car all by herself. Ellen and I followed.

After the car was loaded up, Ellen bent down and hugged her daughter. “Listen to your auntie. She’s a smart lady,” she added with a wink at me.

“I will, Mommy.” Madison sprung into the back seat, strapped herself in.

I turned to my sister, told her she was special.

“Thanks for everything.” She gave me a long hug.

“Come on, Ant Deb. The raccoons. Remember?”

“I’m coming.” I nodded toward my niece.

“Looks like we have a future Girl Scout.”

“I guess so,” my sister smiled. “I’ll have to find her a Brownie troop first.”

I got into the car and poked my head out the window, “Or you could start your own.”

Ellen rolled her eyes, mumbled, “Me be the leader? I don’t like raccoons or the woods.”

I grinned. “I’ll help you.”

## First Place

### Not the Sahara of My Dreams

*By Abby Ripley*

If I knew then what I know now, I would never have volunteered to leave the Land Rover to get help. My sense of direction is naught. My right hand is my guide, and it is East. The problem is that I can pivot my body in a complete circle, making East any direction I point to. Ludicrous, not very helpful.

Anyway, the Land Rover had chosen not to run in the Sahara Desert of Niger. The Assistant Peace Corps Director, John, his wife, Susan, their three-year-old son, Aaron, and the Peace Corps secretary had come to drive me from my village, N’Guigmi, in far eastern Niger, to Niamey, the capitol, for a conference. So many people had come along because it was a rarity to have an opportunity to visit fabled N’Guigmi, fabled because it was so remote and on the shore of Lake Chad which, if you place a compass needle in the middle of the lake, the pencil can nearly encircle the whole continent of Africa, meaning that it was roughly the center of Africa.

N’Guigmi itself was at a crossroads of camel caravans going

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between Nigeria to the south and Libya to the north. I used to sit in the *marché* and watch hundreds of camels with riders and loads of salt or peanuts trail in for an overnight. I was mesmerized by this scene which had probably been occurring years and years before my time. Oh, how I wished to go with them. Pure romance!

From Niamey it took nearly two days to arrive in N'guigmi. All of the second day was over deep layers of sand, some of it forming high dunes. There was no marked road. Just a general direction that came to an abrupt halt when the vehicle would sink to its chassis in the sand. There was always a metal plate that could be slid under a tire for traction. However, to have a vehicle completely breakdown was another matter altogether. The driver also served as a mechanic, and in most situations, he'd have the Land Rover or Power Wagon up and running. In our situation that evening, the driver John assured me that the next village, Mainé-Soroa, where there were other volunteers, couldn't be that far away. So off I went with a canteen of water, wearing a short-sleeved dress that was compulsory in those days, and a pair of open-toed sandals that my brother had crafted for me. I carried a leather

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bag normally used for feeding grain to a horse, and in it my passport, toiletries, and various medicines. I was feeling adventuresome and definitely excited that I would be walking the vaunted desert, especially at night. Well, it didn't take me long to regret my bravado.

There was no moon, and there wouldn't be. There were barely any stars as the desert dust hadn't settled. At first there was a lone tire track, but as I started going uphill, presumably over a dune, the number of tracks increased where soon none were distinguishable. By then it was dark. I had no flashlight. I felt the necessity to find one track that I could follow so upon going through the contents of my bag, I found a book of matches. I used all but the last two to cast just enough light on the rich tan surface until I found an indelible track that led me to the top. There, to my good fortune, I found a three-foot-long stick. A complete aberration so I quickly snatched it up, and used it as a blind man's cane to feel the edges of the track as I slowly walked forward. I was making good progress in the pitch black when I suddenly became aware that there was something on both sides of me. I paused, trying to peer through the dark to determine

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whether I was in any danger. Of course I was always worried about snakes, but thought any self-respecting snake would slither away when it felt the vibration of my footsteps. And about my footsteps, I was now ankle-deep in the sand. The sandals did not prevent *cram cram* thorns from working their way between my bare foot and the inner sole of my sandal so every few minutes I had to stop and dig for the thorns that were puncturing the bottom of my feet. One of the times I did that, I heard a snort, an animal snort I was sure. Could there be wild animals? The only ones I had heard about were elephants that had, long ago, strayed into Niger from the south. There were also giraffe further west in Niger, but whatever I was passing through was more my size. Then, at the top of a sandy rise I made out the huge, spreading horns of a zebu, the African domestic cattle who were herded in parts of the desert by nomadic Fulani people. I grew up with cattle so my fear immediately subsided. I was walking through a herd of zebu who could see sufficiently to avoid me. What relief. Once out of the herd, I saw a campfire in the distance and was tempted to seek out human company, to ask for directions to Mainé-Soroa. I knew that was folly for

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no other reason that it would take me off the road as negligible as it was.

I don't know how long I had been walking, but I was getting tired and cold. Night in deserts is always cold. I should have remembered that because I had been living in the Arizona desert for years. Anyway I had no jacket, no more matches or water though I did find a few cookies in the bottom of my bag which I saved for an emergency should one arise. Above all my feet were sore from the thorns and my ankles nearly unable to support my body any longer. Still, I was not afraid. I decided that if the village didn't soon appear I would curl up in the sand and wait until dawn. Hopefully John and party or someone else would find me.

But then I thought I heard the unison voices of boys reciting verses from the Koran—a sound familiar to me since there was one of these Koranic schools next to my residence in N'guigmi. I quickened my step in the direction of the sound, wondering if there were audible illusions in the desert like optical ones, but, no, I saw dim lights, below me in the distance. It was such a welcome sight that I started to run, following the incline of the dune, sliding, stumbling through a

forest of thistles that I learned later always grew on the moist side of a dune. Thorns ripped at my dress, at my legs and arms. It was extremely painful, but I couldn't stop. Momentum carried me to the bottom of the dune where I finally collapsed. Even so I stumbled to my feet, bleeding in several places, and moved as fast as I could toward the sound of humans—the Koranic school of boys sitting with their teacher in a circle around a fire. When I staggered to its edge, complete silence ensued. All I could see was the whites of the boys' eyes all staring in wide-eyed surprise and fear at me.

I managed to remember enough French to ask where the Peace Corps volunteers lived, hoping I would be understood, and the next thing I remember was being led through the village to a house door. I called out, and when the door opened, and I recognized my old roommate from early days in the program, I collapsed. Collapsed in tears, hysterical. She screamed in alarm which brought other occupants of the house, and they carried me into a bed and brought water. I tried as best I could to explain what had happened. When I awoke a little while later, when John came to apologize, admitting that it had been a really stupid thing to send me off

into the desert by myself, I learned that the village gendarmes had found them and the Land Rover towed in. They had been traumatized, especially since Susan had badly burned her foot on a live ember from the fire they built to keep warm, but nobody was as traumatized as I was. It was an ordeal that I would never forget. It wasn't the Sahara of my dreams.

**Second Place**

**Growing Mammoth Pumpkins**
**Be Hazardous To Your Health**

*By Carol Banner*

I fell off Pig Mountain last night. Flying through the air I wondered what I would break. At my age I'm supposed to be brittle. My hands flew up as I went down heading for the grassy plain. And I remember wondering if my wrist would snap trying to break my fall. But it was a soft landing head up, hands flat for impact, left elbow collapses, body rolls, and my bionic side slaps down.

There were no snaps, crackles or pops. In fact no pain, bloody scrapes or even bruises. I was intact but my watering can was empty. And the pig on the mountain didn't assist. He just stood there atop his domain fat and happy.

I built Pig Mountain. Rather the two guys who my neighbor hired to take down an old cement-brick wall did. My neighbor needed a place to dump his unwanted topsoil. I wanted it and I paid the guys to move the mound to my property and to also seed my old lawn.

The topsoil stood in the yard a couple of years before I had the time to use it. But when I began to shovel I soon discovered hidden under the mound were all the cement

blocks and sewer connections that were supposed to go to the dump. Apparently they decided my backyard was a cheaper solution. So the mound became Weed Mountain until this year when I decided to plant pumpkins. But not your ordinary jack-o-lantern orbs -- mammoth pumpkins with the capacity to grow into 1000-pound squash.

I began in the spring cutting down the old stalks of rampant ragweed and I sprayed all the emerging growth with weed killer. Now I had "Bald Mountain." And while all this was going on I was trying to propagate the giant pumpkin seeds in the kitchen.

Within a few days seedlings were popping up and within a week or so they began to leaf. They were small, infants in my eyes, and how I babied them waiting for warmer days and nights outside. They needed to be acclimated to their future home. Then finally I would transplant them onto my mountain.

I decided the pumpkins would need a watchdog to protect them from visiting deer, rabbits and other wildlife that might have an appetite for squash leaves. All I had was Prancer my 80-something (in human years) Service Dog who absolutely refused to do guard duty without me. And I wasn't about to move my bed to Pumpkin Peak.

And that's where the pig comes in -- a pot-bellied pig made in the USA as a garden ornament. I have one. I

bought it two decades ago from I-don't-remember -who somewhere in Connecticut. It's been in the shed for the past two years while I rehabbed my new knees. The new problem was Pig (aptly named) and his girth. He was too heavy for me to carry. But Providence intervened by setting off my CO2 alarm which brought the Nichols Fire Department along with volunteer firefighters. After checking out my house for gas they were happy to tote Pig up the six-foot tall mound and place him properly as a guard- pig watching over his pumpkins.

I fell off Pig Mountain after watering the vines just before I was going in for the night. I knew I was physically exhausted having racked up over 10,000 steps that day on my wristlet. But I didn't listen to my body. I thought just one more task. When I slipped coming down the steep incline my legs were too tired to do what my brain was telling them and I went into a nosedive. I was so lucky that I was able to just get up and walk away.

And I learned that a pig on the mountain and pumpkins on the vine are only worth it if you don't break your neck. Consequently I'm chopping steps up the side of Pig Mountain tomorrow.

## Honorable Mention

### Comedy of Nature

*By Tom Kidd*

This tale begins in a time before phones did magic tricks, telling us how well we sleep, how far we walk, how much more we have to travel to lose weight, where we were, how to get elsewhere, what the weather is, reading us stories, handling our finances, doing our laundry (okay, not yet, but soon), and, most important to this story, depositing checks.

"It's a nice day, let's walk into town and deposit our tax refund," I say to my wife, Andrea. It's warm, the snow is melting, the world is greening, bugs are buzzing, and we prefer walking over driving. For breezy days like this, you need a jacket. And, if you have hair like mine, you need a hat, or you'll end up looking like a wild man or Albert Einstein or, more to the point, Professor Irwin Corey.

Off we go into town, down the hill from the house towards the brook. Once past our shed, disaster strikes. Ahead of Andrea, carefully choosing my steps, leaving furrows in the mud, I hear her scream, and I jerk around. Nature is attacking. She stands with arms extending out like she's pretending to fly, balancing on one foot. The hungry sludge has sucked a boot from her left foot. And it covets the sock hanging from her toe too — if not all of Andrea, should she fall.

A most comical sight.

Andrea isn't laughing, she needs my help. Here is my chance to be gallant.

Instead, I cock my head to the side and ask, “What’s wrong?” as if her situation is hard to decipher. It’s shameful to admit, but this is what smart asses do. They pretend not to see the patently obvious. Andrea looks at me with a face caught between anger and incredulity. *Is my husband this big an asshole or is he more stupid than I imagine?*

However, feeling a touch of sympathy, I work my way back through the muck to Andrea, steady her, pull up her lolling sock, then reach over to her boot to tug it out of the muck that ravenously struggles to consume it. The ground fights against my efforts, but I slowly work it loose. The ooze gurgles in disappointment. Then I untie the boot, place it back on her foot, and retie it tightly for her. This is all very difficult to do while I laugh and laugh and laugh; I shake with it so much, I nearly topple us both over. Andrea finds none of this funny. And, jerk that I am, I’m laughing as I write this.

Once we reach higher ground, we take some time to wipe our shoes off. It seems as if we survived the incident with little harm. What we don’t know, is that this is only a distraction. By shaking up Andrea a bit, nature has set in motion a more dastardly plan.

We head to the bridge that will take us over the brook. I’d built it myself, and I was unduly proud of this structure, its twenty-foot span that I’d tied to piers on either side, and then tied to trees to keep the bridge in place during floods. There, disrespecting my triumph of engineering, is a turd. *Damn raccoons.* We’re prepared though. Next to our bridge

sits a collection of branches and twigs we collect for removing fecal matter. Andrea calls them shit-sticks. I pick up one and use it to flick the offensive poop aside. Then I toss the soiled stick into the water and watch it float away to join the river, and, I imagine it eventually going out to sea.

We cross the bridge, go up the hill, and into a field that leads into the cemetery. Contemplating on what I’ve cleaned off the bridge, I think back to the times I’ve seen teenagers using our bridge for sex. Had those kids any idea what they were laying in, it might have given them pause. Once I saw a Great Blue Heron cover the bridge with its white slurry as it flew over. What in my bridge made it a toilet for wild animals? What about that bridge causes such arousal in people? Sure, the bridge is hidden by trees and thick shrubs, but it’s part of a pathway. There’s a good chance people will come to cross it.

Here’s our routine when we see naked people on the bridge as we approach:

Andrea yells out, “Is that a Peculated Auburn Shehawk?”

“No,” I yell back, “I think it’s a Gross-Beaked Booger-Flicker. Hand me my binoculars, I want to get a closer look.”

This loud behavior gives the couple time to cover up some, and move to the edge of the bridge to let us walk by. We pretend not to have seen anything. I’ve considered putting up a sign there that would say, “Crossing Only. Please, no Fucking.” My guess is that it’d have the opposite effect, and attract more couples who’d then pose next to the sign while acting out something from the Kama Sutra.

It's more breezy than I prepared for. I wish I'd thought to wear a scarf like Andrea has. As I pull my collar tight, the wind nearly steals my favorite hat away.

Our walk is in is uneventful: No foxes, no coyotes, no Scarlet tanagers, no Snow buntings, no turkeys, none of the usual hawks soar over us, only a few bluebirds that eat fat grubs.

Our walk is little more than a mile. We pass the hospital where Andrea works as a medical transcriptionist and head for the bank. Once in the bank, I get directly in line. Andrea is fumbling around in her purse behind me. As she does this, we move up in the line, move up again and again.

"Tom, I can't find it. It's not here."

"The deposit slip or the check?"

"The check — it's gone."

We get out of line and go over to a table where Andrea dumps everything out of her purse. The refund definitely isn't there. "I must've left it at home," she says.

I see a speck of mud on the pocketbook and think, maybe the zipper came open when Andrea flailed around in the backyard and a gust plucked the check out? On a windy day like today, it could've blown miles away by now. Nature steals our days away, our eyesight, our memories, our loved ones, our dignity, and now our refund?

All we can do is leave and retrace our steps. Our overriding hope is to find that check forgotten on the kitchen island. I wonder how much trouble it'll be to get the government to issue us a new one. It's got to be a pain.

As we walk I scan the ground. My vision was extraordinary back then, nothing escapes me. Pale leaves and bits of paper trash blow about like money in the wind, but they don't fool me, make me give chase. We cross over into the cemetery repeating our earlier path.

"That's it!" I exclaim and point, "there, in the thorn bushes." And it *is* there. It's fluttering about, trying to pull free of its captor. I have only a second or two to reach it — and it takes me three. Off in the wind it goes. It flies towards the Civil War tombstones, then it jumps to the World War One group, and finally over to the World War Two stones. As the check wends and winds its way among them, the tiny American flags placed among the gravestones are flapping their chastisement at it. The absconding refund offends their sense of fairness. The evil wind ignores them and lifts the check beyond my reach, and carries it to the grassy center of a circular road. I chase after it. It's clearly enjoying this game.

As I run for the fugitive refund, startled crows squawk and scatter from me. A squirrel darts across the lawn — and heads right towards my prize. Would I soon be chasing it as it leaps from tree to tree taunting me with my property in its mouth, showing off with its aerial acrobatics as I yell obscenities at it? In my mind I can see people laughing at the story about the poor fellow who'd fallen from a tree while trying to catch a squirrel who'd run off with a tax refund. Ha-ha-ha, so glad my broken bones amuse you. But, no, the gray rodent passes right by it. Soon, it will be in my hand.

And then another flurry grabs the darn thing, and carries it down to the Oranges. No, not the fruit, but tombstones with that rare name on them. At some point, our town had not one but two Oranges living here, and these are not the oddest first names in the cemetery. Headstones, worn and cracking with age, sing out their archaic names to me, introducing themselves, beckoning me to join them, like they know something I don't:

*We're Ina and Affa and Einar and Dianthia*

*Urania, Petrea, Analia, Athalia*

*With Beuel and Geuel and Herkuel and Eziequel*

*Next to Mindwell and Deuel and Fanuel and Lemuel*

Eerily, the voices continue:

*We're Alondra, Amelia, Almira, Adalia*

*Noadiah, Obadiah, Viviana, Malia*

*Vesta and Electa and Mayletta and Permelia*

*With Jabez and Jehiel and Jeruel and Abreonia*

And continue, threatening to break my concentration:

*We're Urana and Jerusa and Alpha and Bathsheba*

*Orinda and Serina and Lemira and Renata*

*With Almon, Aurellia, Amazia, Livonia*

*Salvin, Sabella, Sophronia, Parthenia*

The damn check rolls past the Oranges and onto the road, directing all my concentration back to it. Oh no

*oh God no*, it's heading for the brook, to swim away from me. If it makes it there it has won and will float off to join the shit-sticks in the sea.

I speed down the hill, leaping over headstones like I'm in a steeple race. The wind steals the hat from my head but I give it no mind. Fully fixed on my prey, I run. Piercing out to me comes Andrea's screaming voice with one word.

"STOP!"

Momentum carries me two more steps. My right foot reaches the road. All I have now is one final thought.

I'm dead.

There's no time for introspection or retrospection, only the knowledge that at the end of that thought I'll no longer exist as I sense a speeding vehicle reaching me — and blurring past me leaving only dust and *not* my mangled body.

That infernally devious piece of paper tried to kill me.

I push aside thoughts of mortality and revenge and concentrate on how to stop the would-be assassin from getting away. Like a racehorse bursting from the gate, I shoot forward, galloping past the check. I spin around and stop to act as a barrier to it and the brook. Then I dive forward with a right feint and go left. This ruse deceives my quarry and I catch it and hold it in the air, my heart pumping in triumph. Andrea comes down the hill holding my hat. "Ha, your hair looks funny," she says and hugs me. "You scared the crap out of me. How did you not see that truck?" My knees go wobbly at the mention of it.

As I hug Andrea back I look down at what's in my hand. "Andrea, this refund check isn't ours," I hold it up, a look of horror on my face and say with disbelief, "it's someone else's."

"No, it can't be, not after all that trouble, no." Andrea's face is one of defeat, so I show her the check, and her expression changes to outrage. "You asshole, that *is* our check." When she sees my smile she gives me a good push. She's right though, only an asshole would play a terrible joke on a wife who'd just saved his life. I'm worse than Nature herself.

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**Annual Trumbull Library  
Literary Competition**

*The Library Board thanks the Judges listed below  
for volunteering their time to evaluate the  
Literary Competition entries.*

**JUDGES**

**Grades 3-5**

Poetry.....**Marielaina Tymula**  
Fiction.....**Lynn Haber & Gail Karwoski**  
Nonfiction.....**Lynn Haber**

**Grades 6-8**

Poetry.....**Elizabeth Gomulski**  
Fiction.....**Elise Broach & Steve Gaynes**  
Nonfiction.....**Val Forshaw**

**Grades 9-12**

Poetry.....**Janet Bair & Jim Bair**  
Fiction.....**Natalie Schriefer**  
Nonfiction.....**Val Forshaw**

**Adult**

Poetry.....**Jami Brown, Jodi Netting & Lisa Ryan**  
Fiction.....**Joanna Leone & Sue McKenna**  
Nonfiction.....**Lisa Acerbo**

*Note: The decisions of the Judges are final and all  
winning entries are printed as submitted.*

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